

ISSUE VOTING WITH HEARTS AND MINDS:
EXPLAINING HETEROGENEITY IN DIRECTIONAL AND PROXIMITY VOTING

By

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ABSTRACT

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Is issue voting a uniform, unchangeable process across individuals and contexts, or is it dynamic and manipulable? Even though scholars have been interested in issue voting since the seminal studies in political behavior, there is still ongoing disagreement about what exactly voters prefer in a candidate's issue position. I argue that one reason for this lack of consensus is that the issue voting process is not constant across individuals and contexts. My research addresses one of the most prominent unresolved disputes in the behavior literature by seeking to explain heterogeneity in issue voting processes -- why do some voters make decisions based on issue proximity, while others decide based on issue directions? I theorize that proximity voting is a product of technical thinking, while directional voting is a product of emotional thinking. I find that individuals can display either behavior, or even be induced to do so, depending on the strength and salience of each type of consideration at the time of the decision.

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Dedicated to my family, my never-ending fount of love and support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For any question, it is said, there is always an answer that is simple, obvious, and wrong. In political behavior, one of the most commonly studied questions is “how does one win an election?” and one piece of conventional political wisdom suggests that the most electable candidates – the ones with the greatest odds of winning, all else equal – are those who take centrist positions on issues. Intuitively, this answer is simple, probably fairly obvious, and generally makes a good deal of sense. The idea is that the electorate is comprised of individuals with a wide and diverse array of opinions; successful politicians must win over the median voter in order to procure a majority of the votes, and that median voter’s opinion about a given issue most likely falls somewhere close to the midpoint of one extreme and the other. It *seems* perfectly reasonable to expect the median voter to prefer candidates whose positions are in some sense “close” to his or her own. After all, such candidates might – after ascending to elected office – make decisions that closely mirror those the voters would have made themselves if they had been in the same position. But despite the logical appeal, might the primacy of centrism be an example of “simple, obvious, and wrong?” Some anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a possibility worth considering in greater detail.

In the 2008 American presidential election, for example, Republican John McCain was generally perceived as the more moderate candidate on most issues. He routinely played up his reputation as a “maverick” un beholden to partisan or ideological dogmatism, and criticized Barack Obama for having “the most liberal voting record in the Senate” (McCain 2008) According to the conventional wisdom described above, McCain should have won – or at least have benefited significantly from the fact that voters actually perceived him as the more moderate choice. On Election Day, however, McCain was defeated by a margin of over 9.5 million votes, and statistical analysis has shown that issue proximity had almost no effect on voters’ feelings toward the candidates (Jacoby 2010).

In 2012, Obama’s re-election campaign pitted him against another “moderate” Republican opponent. Mitt Romney was the former governor of Massachusetts, one of the most liberal states in the nation and hostile territory for any conservative politician to try and run for elected office. Governor Romney had been pro-choice and passed comprehensive state-level health care reform that became the blueprint for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, a Democratic flagship bill Obama signed into law in 2010 (Isikoff 2011). At the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Bill Clinton lampooned Romney’s positioning at the first presidential debate of the season, joking, “here’s Old Moderate Mitt!” (Clinton 2012) So, at least in the general election, insiders perceived Romney as having tried to run toward the median voter in the electorate, just as conventional wisdom would dictate. The simple and obvious answer to the question “who wins elections?” would probably have given “Old Moderate Mitt” a pretty decent of success. But like McCain, Romney lost to Obama – known perhaps more for stirring rhetorical

flourishes than centrism – by several million votes. Romney’s failure, like McCain’s, seems at first glance to defy our simple and obvious intuition about political campaigns.

These admittedly terse and terribly oversimplified examples from the 2008 and 2012 elections could lead one to conclude that candidates’ issue positions simply do not matter – or at least that they did not matter very much in these two elections specifically. Perhaps McCain’s and Romney’s moderateness didn’t help them because voters’ considerations about issues were vastly overshadowed by more powerful considerations about partisanship, ideology, evaluations of national economic performance, and/or any number of other non-issue concerns. To at least some extent, this may be true. Indeed, the determinants of voting behavior are numerous, complex, and often idiosyncratic – issue considerations are, at most, just one potential cause out of many that could lead someone to vote a certain way.

On the other hand, taking such a conclusion to its extreme – that issues do not matter at all, or that candidate position-taking is not worth a second thought – would not only be incorrect, but also miss many of the most important judgments candidates and voters each have to make over the course of a campaign. Instead, I (and many others – see, e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2011; 2014; Graefe 2013) argue that issues do matter a great deal, and they mattered even in 2008 and 2012. As political observers, we might have just been looking at them and modeling them the wrong way, which led us to overlook the evidence of their actual impact. Our conventional conception of issue voting, which focused on moderateness and taking positions as close as possible to a voter’s own position, was simple, obvious, and at least partly wrong. By bringing our conceptual model of issue voting more closely in line with the complex, diverse, and context-dependent ways voters

actually think about issues, we can develop a greater understanding of that fundamental question, “how does one win an election?”

Why Study Issue Voting?

Even so, because issue and policy considerations often seem to play a weaker role in voting behavior than, say, partisanship or economic evaluations, some might argue that they are somehow less important or less interesting as a subject of inquiry. But despite this, issue voting warrants rigorous study for at least three reasons.

First, a sizable and longstanding body of literature suggests that voters’ issue positions are significantly related to their political decisions and vote choices. Political scientists have, over the course of several decades, amassed preponderance of evidence that candidates’ issue positions *do* seem to affect voters’ opinions and behavior, even after other factors are taken into account (eg. Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Erikson and Tedin 2007; Kriesi and Sciarini 2004; Lachat 2011). Despite the undeniably stout explanatory power of these other factors, they still do not fully explain the *totality* of variance in mass opinion and voting behavior. Thus, although issue considerations may not be the single most important factor to influence voters’ decisions, they are, at the very least, one of several significant determinants of political evaluations, which makes them inherently interesting to researchers seeking to develop a complete understanding of voting behavior. To ignore the role of issues would leave models of political behavior underspecified and incomplete. Or, in short, issue voting is worth understanding because we already know it happens and matters.

Second, unlike many other factors – including several believed to be even more “important” to voters – position-taking comprises one of the few strategic decisions political candidates actually get to make regularly, all on their own, and without relying on countless dynamic processes beyond their control. By contrast, for instance, candidates can choose which party to align themselves with, but for the most part this is a once-off decision made very early on in life – often before the candidate even begins to think about pursuing elected office (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Politicians who change parties are few and far between, and those who do it run the risk of backlash from stalwarts in the jilted party (Grose and Yoshinaka 2003). Thus, while a candidate’s party label might matter a lot to voters, it is almost always a fixed characteristic rather than a tool to be manipulated at will by a strategic office-seeker. And, to the extent we are interested in learning what candidates can actually *do* to improve their odds of victory, the latter should be of greater concern than the former.

To use an analogy from the physical sciences, the pull of the earth’s gravity is perhaps the single most important factor determining a person’s weight at any given time, but because gravity is almost always constant, those who are interested in the causes of people’s weights tend to focus more on their diets and other shorter-term factors than on the force of gravity. This focus is not based on any belief that one’s diet is more powerful or important than earth’s gravity when it comes to “causing” a person’s weight, but on the fact that gravity is fairly constant over long periods of time. Like candidates’ party labels, gravity can’t tell us much about short-term *variation*, such as changes in events that happen every two or four years (as do elections).

Moreover, whereas people can make regular, direct choices about their dietary habits whenever they want, they have little to no control over the forces of gravity. In this aspect, it is analogous to the role of people's economic evaluations on their voting behavior. The performance of the economy certainly weighs heavily on voters' minds, but despite their weighty rhetoric, there is probably very little a single candidate can do to noticeably influence those conditions. University of Chicago economist Austan Goolsbee, a former chairman of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers, told an interviewer in 2012 that, "the world vests too much power -- certainly in the president, probably in Washington in general -- for its influence on the economy, because most all of the economy has nothing to do with the government." (Ryssdal 2012).

On top of that, whatever minor influence the government *does* have over national economic conditions is diffused over literally hundreds of political officials who interact and compete with one another from the confines of separate branches, each of which wields only limited, heavily checked authority. So, although all elected officials would presumably *like* to improve the national economy, and voters will reward or punish them according to whether things are looking better or worse, a politician's actual role in this area is quite different from what we might like to imagine – a ship's captain who deftly steers his vessel safely through a torrential storm to its intended destination. In reality, it may be more like an overboard sailor clinging helplessly to a hunk of flotsam, bobbing and drifting wherever the sea carries him. Thus, while economic conditions might matter a lot to voters, there is simply not a whole lot a candidate can do about them. The economy is perhaps better characterized as part of the external context in which an election takes place, rather than a lever a candidate can pull strategically to connect with a voter. And

again, to the extent we are interested in learning what candidates can do to improve their chances of success, the latter should be of greater concern than the former.

What candidates *can* decide, on the other hand, is where they stand on important economic issues. Do they favor free trade, or fair trade? Which regulations would they like to institute or abolish? Would they prefer to increase taxes on the wealthiest income bracket, keep them the same, or decrease them? Unlike economic conditions, these are decisions candidates get to make entirely on their own, regardless of which (if any) office they holds. And unlike a party label, candidates get to make these decisions relatively often as opinions shift, issues find their way onto and off of the national agenda, and new events or information come to light. Position-taking may in fact be one of the most significant strategic actions a candidate takes during the course of a given election, and that alone would seem to make issue voting – the way voters respond to candidate position-taking and incorporate it into their voting behavior – worthy of rigorous scientific inquiry.

A third reason to study issue voting is more philosophical: the act of issue voting can be thought of as the basic linkage between mass political opinions and elite behavior. When voters evaluate candidates on the basis of issues, they are comparing the policy decisions they would prefer to see with the ones elites are actually offering (or, in the case of incumbents, the ones elites are *making*), and then rewarding or punishing the candidates accordingly. To the extent that elected officials wish to enact policies that contradict the will of a majority of the electorate, issue voting is what keeps them in check. Without issue voting, politicians who happen to have the right party label, and who are fortunate enough to be blessed with a healthy economy, could simply pursue whatever policy they want, with little fear of any consequence. It would imply that, at least in practice, representative

democracy – a system of government predicated on the people holding public officials accountable for the decisions they make – suffers from a potentially critical flaw in that most of the electorate is either unwilling or unable to perform its proper role. Thus, the study of issue voting can speak directly to one of the most central normative question of the American political system.

Why Study Proximity and Directional Voting?

To date, scholarly attempts to understand issue voting have focused primarily on two competing models: (1) the traditional *proximity*-based model, which predicts a voter will choose the candidate whose position lies closest to the voter's own ideal point on a given issue dimension; and (2) the *directional* model, which predicts a voter will choose the candidate who takes the strongest position on the same side of the issue as the voter's ideal point, relative to some neutral point. These models will be presented and contrasted more formally in Chapter 2, but it is sufficient here to simply note that the academic literature features no shortage of evidence favoring either the pure directional (eg. Aarts, MacDonald, and Rabinowitz 1999; MacDonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz 1991; 1995) or pure proximity (eg. Blais et al. 2001; Pierce 1997; Westholm 1997; 2001) models. However, so far no clear consensus has emerged – despite extensive and occasionally heated debate spanning several decades– as to which side has prevailed (Lewis and King 1999). On this very fundamental question of voting behavior, scholars are divided into separate and seemingly incompatible camps. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, it is only by bridging this gap that we can fully explain the process by which voters incorporate issues into their

decision-making calculus, and thereby develop a deeper understanding of the elite-mass linkage.

Although the primary focus of this dissertation is to differentiate between the Proximity and Directional theories, and investigate the factors that make either process more common, this is not to imply that these are the *only* models scholars use to model issue voting. It is probably fair to say, however, that no other models have received as many followers as these two. And, moreover, many more recent models (see, e.g., Merrill and Grofman 1999) are either simple combinations or marginal refinements of Proximity and/or Directional voting, rather than wholly distinct theories. This ought to be considered a strength of the traditional models, rather than a weakness of the newer ones – after decades of rigorous testing, scholars still seem convinced that issue voting is a product of proximity and/or directional considerations. Therefore, although this dissertation’s focus on these two types of models may not entirely exhaust the realm of issue voting models, it is nevertheless appropriate and consistent with the bulk of the academic literature, as will be demonstrated more fully in Chapter 2.

Unanswered Questions

As it stands, the pure proximity and pure directional models leave us with a number of empirical puzzles and contradictions that have yet to be solved. For instance, the pure proximity model predicts that candidates should converge to the center of each issue dimension and that centrist candidates should routinely defeat more extreme candidates. In reality, however, we very rarely see a great amount of convergence, and centrist candidates do not seem to win all that often (see, e.g. Rabinowitz 1978). On the other hand,

the pure directional model predicts that candidates' issue positions should diverge as far as possible toward the extremes, yet the positions of real candidates seem to be constrained at least within the general vicinity of the middle of the issue space (though not, as we have established, converging to the actual center). Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) attempt to address this shortcoming by introducing a "region of acceptability," – later referred to as a "region of responsibility" (Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 2001) – whereby voters punish candidates who take positions beyond the region's boundary. However, this concept is the source of some controversy (see, e.g., Westholm 2001) and has been only loosely refined in the literature, both theoretically and operationally. The creators of the Directional Theory note that they "have never statistically estimated the boundary of the region," and that they "have left the definition of the region ... flexible" (MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 2001, 496).

The logic of the Directional Theory also produces the seemingly bizarre prediction that a candidates would not vote for themselves, and would in fact penalize a party or candidate who shared their own views exactly (Westholm 2001). In short, although the Proximity and Directional models have largely dominated the issue voting literature, they each still leave a set of pressing questions to be answered. I contend that such questions can be more adequately addressed – and our knowledge of political behavior can be significantly advanced – by looking at the role of *heterogeneity* in issue voting processes, across different voters, issues, and frames.

Why Study Heterogeneity?

The pure Directional and pure Proximity models of issue voting implicitly assume that all voters respond to issues in the same way, and that an individual voter will respond to every different issue in exactly one way. In terms of the scientific method, this is a perfectly natural and understandable starting point. Scientists, *ceteris paribus*, favor parsimonious models over more complex models, and are guided by the Occam's Razor principle to select the simplest theory possible as long as it is still sufficient to explain the phenomenon of interest. However, there often comes a point when the simplest theory fails to account for the entirety of our empirical observations, and the accumulation of unsolved puzzles requires further refinement and complexity in our theories. In other words, "simple, obvious, *and* wrong" must eventually give way to "nuanced and at least closer to right." In the case of issue voting, as I have explained, neither the Proximity nor the Directional model is able to completely explain the observed results, which opens the door for investigating additional refinements and complexities with the potential to solve these outstanding puzzles.

Of the apparently infinite number of conceivable ways scholars could revise the traditional issue voting models to try and account for the observed inconsistencies, heterogeneity seems on its face to be at least an attractive candidate. Much of the evidence that has been used to test one theory against the other actually appears to point somewhere in between. The shape of voters' utility curves may provide the clearest example of this – as will be explained more formally in Chapter 2, the Proximity model predicts a symmetric utility curve that peaks for a candidate located at the voter's own ideal position, whereas the Directional model predicts a monotonic utility curve that

increases for candidates holding more and more intense positions on the same side of the issue as the voter's ideal point. However, the observed utility curves constructed from real US presidential election data (see Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989, 107) are neither perfectly symmetric nor perfectly monotonic. Most are curved *and* asymmetric, as if to suggest that *both* Proximity and Directional considerations play some role in voters' evaluations. Likewise, candidates very rarely take issue positions as centrist as the pure Proximity model postulates, yet they also rarely take positions as extreme as the pure Directional model postulates (Merrill and Grofman 1997). As if being pulled by *both* Proximity and Directional voting processes in the electorate, candidates most often take issue positions that fall into what we could call a "Goldilocks zone" – not too moderate, not too radical, but just right.

Moreover, heterogeneity across different types of voters, issues, and frames could hardly be considered a controversial proposition, given what we already know about the intricacies of human political behavior. A substantial body of research suggests that different kinds of voters react to identical stimuli in different ways (eg. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al 1960; Converse 1964; Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Feldman 1988; Goren 1997; Jacoby 1988), that individual voters react to different kinds of issues in different ways (eg. Carmines and Stimson 1980; Krosnick 1988), and that framing a given issue or controversy in strategically different ways can profoundly affect how a given voter reacts to the issue (Berinsky and Kinder 2006; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Jacoby 2000). Why, then, would we reasonably expect that every voter should evaluate candidates' issue positions using the same process, and that this process should remain fixed regardless of which issue they are considering or how it was presented to

them? In fact, as of yet no compelling theoretical or empirical reason has been offered as to why this should be the case. Only the attractiveness of parsimonious models led to such implicit assumptions, yet in the face of empirical inconsistencies such as we have seen, parsimony must sometimes give way to greater explanatory power. If Proximity and Directional considerations each appear to play a role in voters' decision calculi, and if heterogeneity is an exceedingly common characteristic of political behavior which seems at first glance to be consistent with the observed evidence, then it stands to reason that heterogeneity in issue voting processes may be able to provide that explanatory power.

The potential benefits of modeling issue voting heterogeneity are obvious enough that scholars – including some of those responsible for developing the pure models – have already been suggesting it for years. Morris and Rabinowitz (1997) considered the theoretical implications of an electorate made up of both Proximity and Directional voters in terms of optimal candidate strategies, while MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug (1995) and Kropko (2012) tested for (but did not find) differences in issue voting processes on the basis of voters' level of political sophistication. The more recent “unified theory of issue voting (Iversen 1994; Merrill and Grofman 1999) departs from the view of voters as either pure proximity or pure directional voters, and instead models each individual's utility function as a factor of both proximity and directional elements. However, once again the model estimates a single mixing parameter for each voter across all issues and contexts – that is, different voters may employ different mixes of directional and proximity considerations, yet whatever idiosyncratically weighted combination of criteria a voter happens to employ will always be the same, regardless of the issue or context.

Moreover, despite all of the studies accounting for or alluding to the possibility of multiple different issue voting processes coexisting simultaneously, so far none has explained *why* such differences come about in the first place. In short, many political scientists seem ready to acknowledge that heterogeneity exists, yet we still have little understanding of its source or cause.

This dissertation aims to fill that void in the literature, and help bridge the divide between the proximity and directional theories, by proposing and testing a theory of issue voting heterogeneity that draws from well-established research on emotion and symbolic politics. Specifically, I propose a model of issue voting, which postulates that that directional voting is a product of symbolic thinking and proximity voting is a product of technical thinking. This, in turn, implies that the use of each type of voting is *conditional*, because personal and contextual factors related to these different types of thinking can influence the way voters incorporate issue positions into their political decisions.

Unique Contribution

The fact that this dissertation offers possibly the first systematic explanation of heterogeneity in issue voting processes makes it a noteworthy addition to the political science literature. Such an explanation is valuable in its own right, but it is all the more significant given the long and heated debate between directional and proximity theorists.

Decades of extensive research pitting one pure theory against the other have so far turned up mixed results, with the findings of different studies contradicting one another and battles waged over untestable methodological assumptions that tip the scales in favor of each researcher's preferred model (Lewis and King 1999). But I contend that *many* of

these contradictory findings are not aberrations or mere technical errors, as one might possibly conclude – rather, they are in fact substantively meaningful manifestations of the heterogeneity and context-dependency of issue voting. For at least some major subset of the academic literature, studies with findings supporting the directional theory did so in part because they looked at voting behavior under conditions that increased the likelihood of directional voting. And, conversely, many studies with findings supporting the proximity theory did so in part because they looked at voting behavior under conditions that increased the likelihood of proximity voting. According to a traditional framework that either denies or ignores the role of heterogeneity, one entire line of work or the other must be rejected as wrong, and one could not possibly say how long it would take to officially – at long last – settle the dispute as to which side should be relegated to scientific history and which should live on as a fruitful research program. This dissertation, on the other hand, shines new light on past research favoring *both* sides of the debate, in a way that preserves the insights of each theory by acknowledging that voters could engage in *either* proximity or directional voting (or some combination of the two), depending on the interplay of various characteristics of the voters themselves, the issue in question, and the way the issue has been framed to them.

Moreover, if the findings of previous studies were affected in part by conditions and factors that do influence the type of voting in which individuals engage, but which were not explicitly taken into account, then my Conditional Model of Issue Voting should help achieve greater verisimilitude and more robust conclusions for scholars of political behavior.

Road Map of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 contains a more thorough background of the relevant academic research, and formally lays out the theoretical argument of this dissertation. In Chapter 3, the first empirical chapter, I test whether the strength of voters' affective attachments (or aversions) to political symbols related to a given issue alter their issue voting process. In Chapter 4, I present the results of an original survey experiment that tests whether framing political issues in strategic ways (ie. in relative or absolute terms, and using weak or strong symbolic content) can induce voters to engage in proximity or directional voting. In Chapter 5, I look for differences in voting models across different issues, to test whether characteristics of issues themselves make voters bring either proximity or directional considerations to bear when they think about different policy realms. Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the overall body of evidence presented in the dissertation, elucidate the implications for our understanding of political behavior, and suggest possible opportunities for future research.

Taken as a whole, this dissertation provides some of the first systematic evidence that issue voting processes are not as fixed and universal as once believed. Rather, they are idiosyncratic, context-dependent, and manipulable. Only by taking these important nuances into account can political scientists fully understand and explain the rich complexities of voting behavior.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

As chapter 1 made clear, scholarly interest in issue voting is hardly a new trend. In fact, many of the seminal works in the early years of political behavior research devoted at least a portion of their attention to the role of political issues in determining public opinion and/or vote choice (e.g. Berelsen, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Boyd 1969; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Campbell et al 1960; Pomper 1972; Pool, Abelson, and Popkin 1965) and this focus only intensified as the “rational choice” utility maximization paradigm emerged within political science (e.g. Black 1958, Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Downs 1957; Key 1966; Olson 1965; Ostrom 1998; Riker 1962). Contemporary observers continue to search for issue voting effects in present day elections (e.g. Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2011; Lewis-Beck et al 2008; Graefe 2013) though sometimes fail to find them (e.g. Jacoby 2010).

However, despite all the attention that has been paid over the years, scholars still do not yet agree about how issue voting actually works. The literature remains fraught with unsettled debates over whose model best describes the way voters incorporate political issues into their richly complex decision-making calculi.

Leading Contenders

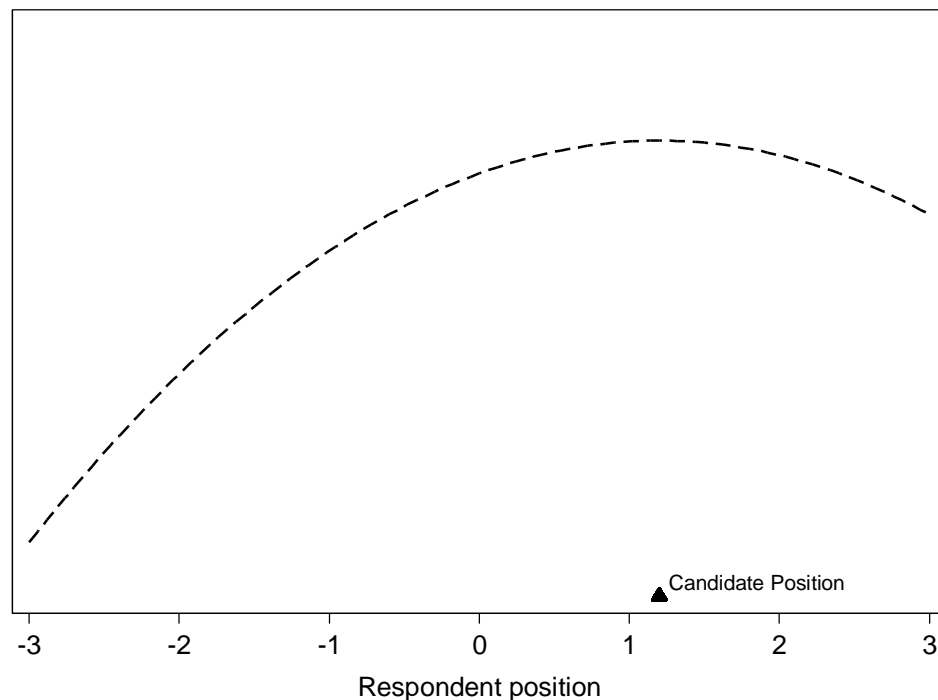
As introduced in Chapter 1, the two competing models of issue voting that have received the most attention in the political science literature are: (1) the traditional *proximity*-based model, which is based on a voter's relative closeness to each candidate in issue space; and (2) the *directional* model, which is based on the direction and intensity of voter and candidate issue positions. Before laying out the novel theoretical framework I am proposing, it may help to describe each of these pure models more formally.

Proximity Voting

In the issue voting literature, the classical model of proximity voting (see Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook 1970; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1982; Hinich and Enelow 1984) is often taken for granted as *the* model of issue voting, in part because it seems so intuitively logical. In short, it suggests that – all other factors being equal – a voter will support most strongly the candidate whose position on a given issue is located directly at the voter's own ideal point. As a hypothetical candidate's position moves further away – in either direction, which is crucial for present purposes – from that point, the voter's evaluation of the candidate becomes less positive¹. Figure 2-1 illustrates this theoretical relationship by showing how positively voters with different ideal points on a given issue might evaluate a hypothetical candidate. The candidate's strongest support comes from voters whose ideal points are

¹ In the form of the proximity model used in this dissertation, the predicted effect of an issue is estimated using the squared distance from the candidate's ideal point to the voter's ideal point. Small distances mean a more positive evaluation of the candidate. For example, suppose we have a particular 7-point issue scale ranging from -3 to +3. If the candidate is located at -1 and the voter is located at +1, the effect would be predicted using the calculation $(-1 - 1)^2 = 2^2 = 4$, with the small result indicating a strong positive effect because the candidate and voter are highly proximate to one another.

Figure 2-1. Theoretical Evaluations of a Hypothetical Candidate by Voters with Varying Ideal Points in the Proximity Voting Model



closest in proximity to the candidate's position, with voters who are more distant from the candidate on the issue spectrum evaluating the candidate less positively.

Candidates, then, can maximize their electoral support by strategically positioning themselves as close as possible to the ideal point of the median voter on every issue. Therefore, proximity models predict convergence of candidate positions toward the center – specifically, toward the position of the median voter in the electorate (Black 1958; Hotelling 1929).

Despite the ubiquity of proximity models in the issue voting literature, however, a number of scholars (e.g. Rabinowitz 1978; Stokes 1963) have raised doubts as to whether they can accurately account for the actual cognitive processes voters go through when choosing between candidates. Such critiques have asserted that the proximity model is

inconsistent with what else we know about issue voting, because it requires a far more complex and sophisticated familiarity with issues and candidates than most voters typically have. After all, effective use of proximity voting requires voters to know not only what each candidate says about every issue they wish to consider, but they also have to be able to evaluate the relative *extremism* of each candidate's position on the issue scale. Essentially, voters must think about issues in terms of detailed ordered dimensions (Stokes 1963), allowing them to assess the relative distance of their own ideal point to an almost infinite number of highly specific positions a candidate could take.

The proximity voting model therefore seems to assume voters possess a rather impressive level of detailed policy information, yet empirical evidence suggests that most voters know actually know very little about most issues and most candidates, most of the time. Realistically, proximity voting in practice may simply be more complex than most unmotivated "cognitive misers" (Taylor 1981) are typically able to carry out.

Moreover, critics of the proximity model have pointed out that the model's predictions – namely, candidate convergence to the center and some candidates receiving their strongest support from centrist voters – have not stood up well to empirical testing (Rabinowitz 1978; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). Candidates do not converge to the center of the policy space to nearly the degree suggested by a pure proximity model, and tend to receive their strongest support from voters with non-centrist issue positions.

Directional Voting

The directional model of issue voting, first proposed by Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) offers a plausible alternative to proximity voting, rooted in what its proponents

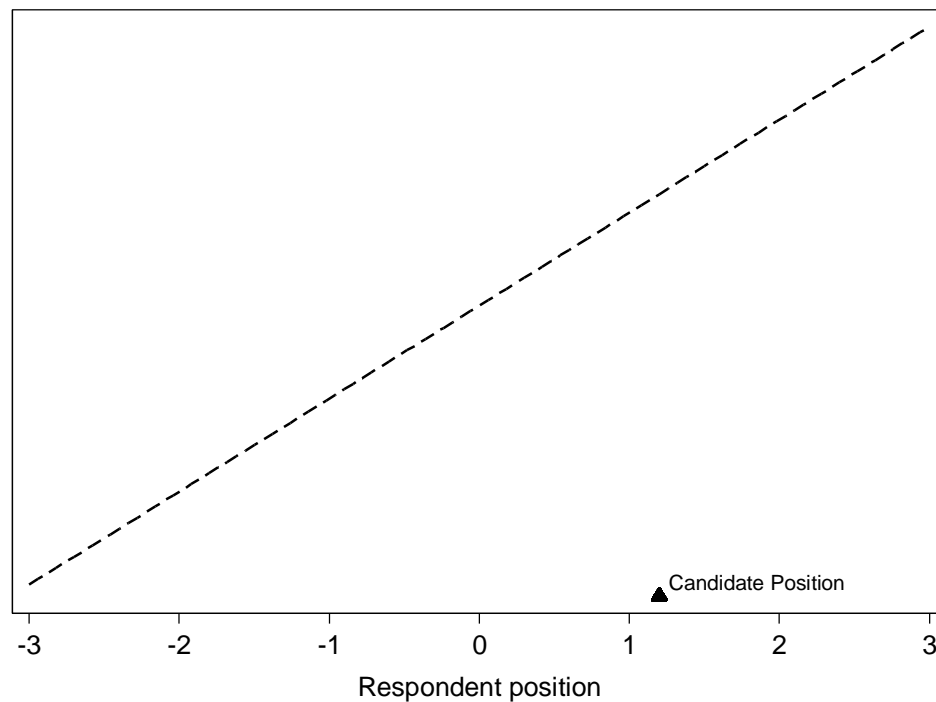
claim is a more realistic representation of voters' cognitive processes. According to this theory, what matters is not policy proximity – since most voters lack specific crystallized policy positions to begin with – but the *direction* and *intensity* of one's response to a candidate's issue position. Formally, the model still begins by representing the candidates and voter in issue space, but in this case the voter ought to choose the candidate who takes the strongest stance in the same direction as the voter, relative to some neutral point.

So, whereas the proximity model estimates the effect of an issue using the Euclidean distance from the voter's position to the candidate's position, the directional model does so using the scalar product of the two positions. If we conceive of each issue dimension as a number line with zero representing the neutral position, negative numbers representing increasingly liberal positions and positive numbers representing increasingly conservative positions, then the unidimensional scalar product is simply the number corresponding to the voter's position multiplied by the number corresponding to the candidate's position.² Figure 2-2 illustrates this just as Figure 2-1 did with the proximity model. Notice that whereas the proximity model predicts a curve that peaks directly over the candidate's position and decreases as the voter's ideal point gets farther away in either direction, the directional model predicts a monotonic curve with the candidate's strongest support coming from voters who occupy extreme positions on the candidate's side of the issue.

The theoretical appeal of the directional model is that it assumes a far simpler – and therefore more realistic – understanding of issues on the part of voters. Instead of having to

² For example, if the candidate is located at -1 on a 7-point scale ranging from -3 to +3, and the voter is located at +1, the effect would be predicted using the calculation $(-1) \times (1) = -1$, with the small negative result indicating a modest negative effect because the candidate and voter are on opposite sides of the issue, but neither displays a high level of intensity toward this issue.

Figure 2-2. Theoretical Evaluations of a Hypothetical Candidate by Voters with Varying Ideal Points in the Directional Voting Model



place candidates' positions fairly precisely on an ordered set of alternatives, individuals engaging in directional voting only need to think about issues in terms of a diffuse sense of alternate policy directions. In other words, because the act of directional voting is less cognitively difficult and requires a lower level of information than proximity voting, it may be more widespread in a minimally informed and minimally interested electorate.

Previous Tests

The academic literature features no shortage of evidence favoring either the pure directional (e.g. Aarts, MacDonald, and Rabinowitz 1999; Adams, Bishin, and Dow 2004; MacDonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz 1991; MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1995) or pure proximity (e.g. Blais et al. 2001; Pierce 1997; Westholm 1997; 2001) models, yet to

date no clear consensus has emerged – despite extensive debate – as to which side has ultimately prevailed.

In fact, much of the evidence seems to point somewhere in between the two pure models. For example, candidates very rarely take issue positions as centrist as the pure proximity model postulates, yet they also rarely take positions as extreme as the pure directional model postulates (Merrill and Grofman 1997). Likewise, the voter utility curves estimated from actual data are rarely as monotonic as the directional theory would predict, nor as sharply peaked as the proximity theory would predict (see, e.g., Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989, 107). This ambiguity has motivated many researchers to test models that combine elements of both proximity and directional voting.

But, even among studies that account for a possible blending of the proximity and directional models, a prevailing underlying assumption seems to be that individual voters must always employ the same spatial voting criteria across all issues. Morris and Rabinowitz (1997) formally model a dual electoral system comprised of one subset of directional voters and another subset of proximity voters, while Tomz and Van Houweling (2008) estimate experimentally the relative proportion of voters using proximity and directional criteria by artificially offering alternatives where the models would make opposite predictions about vote choice. In each case, a voter is classified as either a proximity voter or a directional voter, and is assumed to apply the same spatial criteria to any issue.

The more recent “unified theory of issue voting (Iversen 1994; Merrill and Grofman 1999) departs from the view of voters as either pure proximity or pure directional voters, and instead models each individual’s utility function as a factor of both proximity and

directional elements. The relative weights granted to the proximity and directional components of the unified model are allowed to vary across voters, and are determined by a mixing parameter, β , to be estimated for each voter. This parameter is a measure of each voter's sensitivity to spatial distance relative to his or her sensitivity to the directional effect on the other. However, once again the model estimates a single value of β for each voter across all issues – that is, an individual may fall somewhere between a pure proximity and pure directional voter, yet whatever idiosyncratically weighted combination of criteria he or she happens to employ will always be the same, regardless of the issue being considered.

This distinction is important because the political behavior literature provides strong evidence that individuals do not necessarily perceive all issues the same way (e.g., Baum 2002; Carmines and Stimson 1980; Krosnick 1988) and that the positions they prefer depend in large part on the way the issues are framed to them (Chong and Druckman 2007; Iorio and Human 1996; Iyengar 1990; Jacoby 2000). In this dissertation, I will demonstrate that levels of symbolic and technical thinking – possibly arising in part from differences across voters, issues, and communication – can lead individuals to use measurably different processes to translate issue positions into voting decisions. Moreover, the failure to account for this variation can help explain why political scientists have failed to reach a consensus about how issue voting works.

Theoretical Argument

I argue that a voter's mind contains a mix of both proximity and directional considerations, either or both of which could potentially be brought to bear on a given

opinion. Issues have both symbolic and technical content – when voters evaluate a candidate on the basis of a given issue, they are really responding to two things simultaneously: (1) what they *know* about the candidate’s issue position (ie. technical thinking), and (2) how they *feel* about the candidate’s issue position (ie. symbolic attachments). This technical-symbolic dichotomy is the theoretical basis for Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) classification of “easy” and “hard” issues; I submit that the same components can help us understand heterogeneity in issue voting processes.

The effect of a given issue on a voter’s behavior can resemble either Proximity or Directional voting, depending on the strength of each of these components. Proximity voting is a product of *technical considerations* – someone engaging in this type of voting must have specific knowledge about a candidate’s position and where it would fall in a hypothetical ordered continuum of policy alternatives. Directional voting is a product of *symbolic considerations* – someone engaging in this type of voting need only gauge which side of the issue a candidate is on, and then respond according to the direction and intensity of his own affective response toward the stimulus.

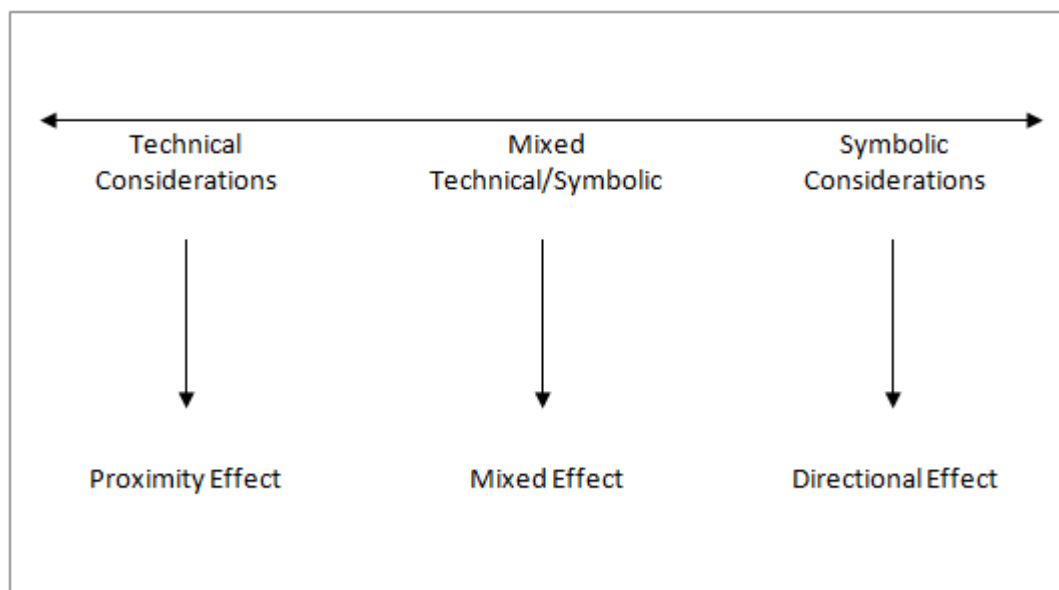
We can predict the effect a given candidate’s issue position will have on a voter’s behavior by looking at the symbolic and/or technical power it has for the voter in question. This power could be a product of at least three different elements: (1) characteristics of the voters themselves, (2) the degree of technical or symbolic content inherent to the issue, and (3) the manner in which the candidate’s issue position is presented or framed. Issue voting requires *voters* to respond to a candidate’s stance on an *issue* after it has been *communicated* to them in some way.

The first of these elements suggests that some *voters* simply bring more technical or symbolic considerations to bear than others when they respond to the same political stimuli. The second suggests that some *issues* are inherently more symbolic or technical than other issues. The third suggests that when issue-related messages are expressed to a voter, the specific nature of that *communication* can be more technical or symbolic. Or, alternatively, communication could – strategically or inadvertently – employ framing and priming effects to induce voters to make a certain type of consideration more cognitively accessible. Characteristics of each of these elements – the voter, the issue, and the message; as well as perhaps the interplay between them – can increase the technical or symbolic power of a candidate’s issue position for a voter. I am agnostic about the relative strength of each component in a voter’s calculus, although this dissertation can certainly offer some initial indications as to which play a stronger role.

Specifically, issue effects should follow the pattern laid out in Figure 2-3. As the diagram illustrates, under conditions favoring technical considerations, a voter’s behavior should resemble proximity voting. This is the state of the classic ideal democratic citizen, who is highly informed about all things political, who makes decisions rationally and stoically without letting affective attachments or aversions cloud his judgment. The voters knows enough about the candidate’s position to adequately judge its proximity to their own positions, bring many technical details to bear on his decision, and are not hindered by “mere” feelings toward stimuli on one side or the other of the issue.

Under conditions favoring symbolic considerations, on the other hand, a voter’s behavior should resemble directional voting. This is closer to the state of the typical citizen portrayed by the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al 1960). These voters do not

Figure 2-3. Theorized Effects of a Given Issue on Voters' Evaluations of Candidates, Across Technical, Symbolic, and Mixed Considerations



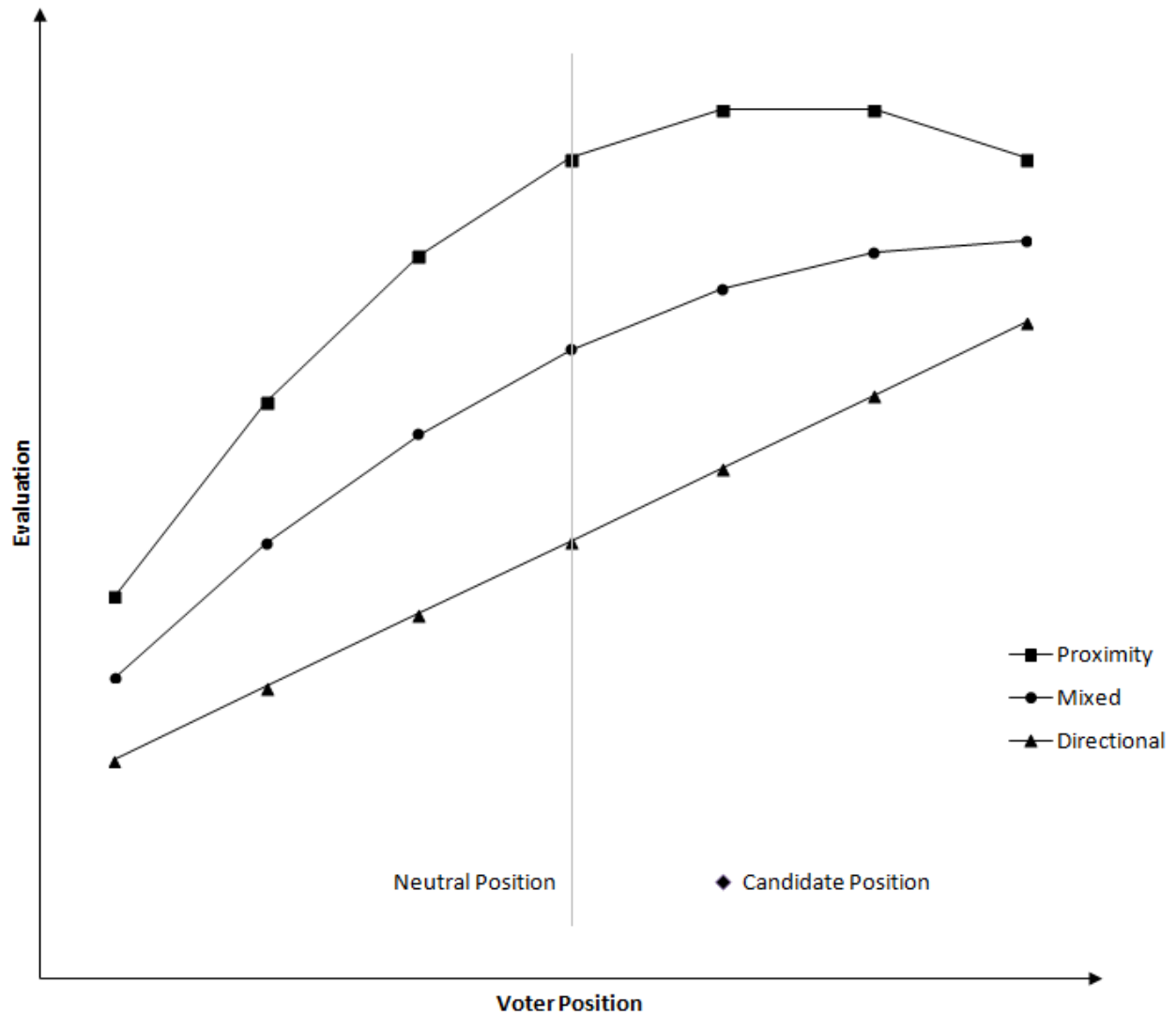
know much about the policy details of this issue and probably could not tell you precisely where the candidate stands on it, but to the extent that they do think about it, they develop emotional attachments to symbols that come to mind and perceive the issue only in a diffuse sense of policy directions. Voters do not know enough about the candidate's issue position to adequately judge its proximity to their own, and bring few if any technical details to bear on their decision, but they do react with very strong feelings toward political stimuli on one side or the other of the issue.

Under conditions favoring some mix of symbolic and technical considerations, voters' behavior is influenced by *both* processes. They know a lot about the candidate's issue position, and also react with strong feelings toward stimuli on either side of the issue. If symbolic and technical considerations are pushing them in concurrent directions (e.g. they knows the candidate shares their exact issue position, *and* they have a strong positive

affective reaction to symbols on their side of the issue), then the issue should make them certain and passionate about supporting the candidate. If their symbolic and technical considerations are pushing them in different directions (e.g. they know the candidate's position is significantly more moderate or extreme than their own, yet they still have a strong positive emotional reaction because they are on the same side of the issue), then their behavior should be somewhere between pure proximity and pure directional voting. This mixed effect is easier to demonstrate with regression coefficients than it is to understand conceptually, so Figure 2-4 may help demonstrate what it would look like. The diagram represents a given voter's evaluation of candidates with various ideal points on a given issue. The black diamond represents the voter's ideal point, and the three marked curves represent how positively or negatively the voter evaluates incrementally more liberal or conservative candidates on the basis of this issue. Higher values on the y-axis correspond to a more positive evaluation, while lower values correspond to a more negative evaluation. The neutral zero point is represented by a vertical gray line in the center of the diagram.

The curve marked with squares shows the effect of the issue if the voter acts according to the Proximity Model (which I predict will happen under conditions favoring technical considerations). The most favored candidate position is directly at the voter's own ideal point, and the voter's evaluation becomes increasingly negative as the position of the candidate moves in either direction. The voter likes a slightly more liberal candidate just as much as a slightly more conservative candidate, if those candidates are equidistant from the voter.

Figure 2-4. Theoretical Evaluations of a Hypothetical Candidate by Voters with Varying Ideal Points, Compared Across Models



The curve marked with triangles shows the effect of the issue if the voter acts according to the Directional Model (which I predict will happen under conditions favoring symbolic considerations). The most favored candidate position is a strong stance on the same side of the issue as the voter, relative to the neutral point, and the voter's evaluation decreases monotonically as the position of the candidate moves toward the opposite side.

Regardless of the distance of two candidates to the voter's ideal point, the voter always prefers the candidate who is stronger or more "extreme" on his side of the issue.

The curve marked with circles shows the effect of the issue if the voter acts according to some mixture of the Directional and Proximity Models (which I predict will happen under conditions favoring a combination of symbolic and technical considerations). The most favored candidate positions are at the voter's ideal point and slightly stronger than the voter on the same side of the issue, and the curve is neither monotonic nor symmetric. The voter still prefers candidates on his own side of the issue, but in contrast to the pure Directional Model, it is possible for a candidate to be too extreme, even on the voter's side of the issue.

And of course, the symbolic-technical dimension in Figure 2-3 is represented as a continuous spectrum, which reflects the possibility of a seemingly infinite set of combinations between symbolic and technical considerations – and, as such, that an issue's effect need not fit into one of a few discrete "bins," but rather can be described in terms of the degree to which it resembles directional voting at one extreme, or proximity voting at the other.

The final possible scenario is when *neither* technical nor symbolic considerations are brought to bear. In this case, I submit that a given candidate's issue position should have *no* impact on a voter's decision-making calculus. Voters lack the knowledge necessary to vote proximately and have no strong feelings either positively or negatively. They neither know nor care much about the candidate's issue position whatsoever, so it is of little to no consequence.

As mentioned earlier, I suspect that previous tests between the Proximity and Directional models have failed to reach a consensus in part because they have not accounted for variation in technical and symbolic content. Studies favoring the Directional model have largely come from large surveys of voters who are asked to evaluate real parties and candidates on the basis of information and attachments they have acquired from real world processes. A vast literature suggests most voters operate with appallingly little information (Bartels 1996; Dahl 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Lippmann 1992) and that affect heavily influences their attitudes (e.g. Brader 2005; Kinder 1994; Marcus 2000), so if my theory is correct, directional voting *is* close to what we would expect from most voters most of the time in elections from the real world.

In actual campaigns, we very rarely see voters who make decisions under conditions of purely technical content. We can, however, produce such conditions *artificially* in an experiment. So not surprisingly, the most convincing tests favoring the Proximity model have come from experiments where hypothetical candidates' issue positions are either placed on a scale *for* the respondent (Tomz and Van Houweling 2008) or explained precisely to the respondent in great detail, stripped of most or all symbolic content (Lacy and Paolino 2010). Essentially, these are experimentally simulated High Technical Content environments – and if my theory is correct, Proximity voting *is* what we would expect from voters under these conditions. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that these experimental findings can be generalized to voting behavior in actual elections, because the artificial conditions poorly reflect realistic levels of information and emotion.

The literature's findings appear contradictory and even incompatible to proponents of the unconditional spatial models, but I argue this is only because each study is observing

voters under a different configuration of symbolic and technical considerations. My conditional approach would account for both sets of findings and generate many new testable hypotheses. I lay out and test these hypotheses in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER 3

SYMBOLIC ATTACHMENTS AND AVERSIONS

How accurate is the proposition, “once a proximity voter, always a proximity voter?” Does an individual only ever engage in one issue voting process and never the other? Or can one person’s behavior change depending on the context? This chapter addresses these questions by testing whether people are more likely to vote directionally on issues for which they have strong symbolic attachments or aversions. The results mainly confirm the tenets of the conditional model of issue voting.

Let us begin from the premise that an individual may (and often does) apply different criteria when pondering different questions pertaining to a given choice. Consider, for example, the act of picking out a vehicle to purchase. When evaluating a car on the basis of its cost or gas mileage, the cognitive process is probably something like a rational calculation based on objective information. The buyer finds out the quantity of interest, compares it to his ideal price point or fuel efficiency, and assesses the desirability of the vehicle accordingly. But when evaluating a car on the basis of its color, the buyer might bring more affect-related content to bear. Perhaps a white paint job might recall fond memories of an old family pickup, or a sleek cherry red could stir feelings of excitement and adventure. Either way, the fact that buyers are always thinking about the same car

does not imply that they are always thinking the same *way* about each different aspect of the purchase. When evaluating a car, or choosing between multiple alternatives, they could bring a number of different considerations to bear – some of which are based on technical concerns, and some of which are more symbolic and emotional.

Moreover, buyers' unique personal background and personality may contribute to them reacting in a particular way about a given characteristic. For some consumers, the make of the vehicle carries primarily informational content. They may believe, for instance, that Buicks are durable while Hondas are expensive to repair. For other consumers, the make of the vehicle could be related more to emotional attachments. Someone whose parent worked in a Ford factory their entire life may be passionately loyal to Ford cars and develop a personal aversion to Chevrolets, for example. But, we would probably not expect this to be the case for every consumer – least of all those raised into Chevy families. For others who lack any special attachment to specific car makers, the brand name might not carry any emotional content at all, and they will be more likely to evaluate their choice on the basis of technical considerations. In short, attachments and aversions (or the lack thereof) are deeply personal, idiosyncratic traits that drive individual behavior in profound, yet often predictable ways.

The key point to take away from this analogy is that the internal processes behind a given subjective judgment are not necessarily monolithic, even for a single person. They incorporate an impressively wide range of combinations between technical and emotional considerations, depending on the individual's own experience or orientation toward each separate aspect of the decision. I submit that if heterogeneity and conditionality in decision-making processes are easy enough to imagine for vehicle purchases, then it is only

a small step further to suggest the same could be true for issue voting. A given voter may use different issues differently, similar to the way a car buyer thinks differently about cost than about color. And, two different voters may use the same issue differently, similar to the way a car's make can hold different meanings for two different car buyers. The key factor, I argue, is whether the voter possesses strong symbolic attachments and/or aversions that are specifically relevant to the issue under consideration. The extent to which this condition is met should determine whether an individual engages in proximity or directional voting with respect to the issue.

Symbolic Attachments

By “symbolic attachments” I refer to an individual’s affective orientations – whether positive or negative – toward social groups and value perspectives (Campbell et al 1960; Krosnick 1991). Previous research has shown symbolic attachments to influence policy preference and issue voting (Conover 1988; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears et al. 1980; Popp and Rudolph 2011) as well as electoral coalition formation (Kaufmann 2003), and can even lead individuals to espouse seemingly extreme measures (Cobb and Elder 1976; Edelman 1964) including ethnic violence and genocide (Kaufman 2006). This relationship with extremity is particularly relevant to the proximity versus directional debate, since the question boils down to whether voters punish candidates on their own side of the issue for extremity, or instead reward them for it.

The symbolic attitudes literature (eg. Sears 1983; Sears and Citrin 1985; Sears and Kinder 1970) suggests that such attitudes develop very early in life, through the process of socialization. During their formative years, children are indoctrinated with behavioral and

attitudinal norms by their parents, friends, and others around them. They learn who are the “good guys” and “bad guys” in society, and begin to attach corresponding positive or negative affect to diffuse political symbols such as parties, ideological orientations, and social groups. By the time they reach adulthood, these attitudes have become deeply entrenched, such that meeting those symbols later in life will continue to arouse positive or negative emotion, which is believed to be a powerful determinant of other attitudes and behavior (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

Therefore, I expect that voters with the strongest symbolic attachments should care more about which *side* of the issue candidates are on than they do about issue proximity. They may be more likely to perceive people as divided into “teams” of supporters seeking to move policy in opposite directions on the issue, and develop emotional loyalties to one team and a strong distaste for the other. When evaluating a candidate on the basis of an issue, then, these voters should call upon their powerful attachments and prefer issue positions on their team over issue positions on the enemy team. The symbols that come to mind when they think about the issue should evoke the positive and negative emotions they connected during pre-adulthood, and these emotions should drive their decision calculus even at the expense of calculated “rational” considerations like issue proximity.

If we think of voters using “top of the mind sampling” to randomly select a particular consideration when they need to make a political decision (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992), then the conditional model suggests that individuals carry in their heads some unique mix of both technical and symbolic considerations that may be applied. Theories of attitude structure hold that when deciding something, individuals typically only use considerations that are both *available* and *applicable* (Chong and Druckman 2007;

Higgins 1996; Price and Tewksbury 1997). The availability requirement is that people cannot sample from considerations they do not possess in the first place. For instance, an individual can only select a symbolic attachment from the top of their mind if they actually hold such attachments. The applicability requirement is that in order for a particular consideration to impact a decision, it must be deemed relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand (see Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Strack, Martin, and Schwarz 1988). We would not, for example, generally expect even a very strong affective attachment to a professional sports franchise to influence one's attitude toward health care. Thus, only symbolic attachments which are reasonably related to a given issue should matter.

The preceding discussion generates the main hypothesis of this chapter – that voters are more likely to engage in *directional* voting if they have *strong* symbolic attachments related to a given issue. Those who lack strong symbolic attachments, conversely, should be more likely to vote proximately or not take the issue into consideration to begin with.

Deriving the Model Equation

At the individual voter level, issue voting models can be tested in two different ways: (1) by modeling voters' level of support for different candidates, (2) by modeling voter choice *between* different candidates. The second method often makes for an inconclusive test because a great deal of the time, the two models make identical predictions about vote choice. For instance, both proximity and directional considerations would lead a strong liberal voter to support strong liberal candidates (whose positions fall very close to the voter's ideal point and are also strongly in the same direction from the

neutral position) and dislike strong conservatives. Only under a specific set of circumstances – e.g. centrist voters choosing between centrist candidates – do the models make opposite predictions, and unfortunately real-world survey data only gives us access to a limited range of candidate positions. That makes it difficult to draw informative and generalizable conclusions outside of an experimental setting.

Using each voter's level of support for each candidate as the dependent variable, however, the theories *do* make different predictions about the distribution of support among different voters who would ultimately make the same vote choice. For instance, given a candidate who takes a position more moderate than the most extreme voter – which seems to be the norm, and a reasonable assumption – the directional theory suggests candidates should receive *less* support from voters who share their position exactly than they receive from even more extreme voters on the same side of the issue. The proximity theory predicts the opposite, thereby establishing a case where the two forms of voting are empirically distinguishable. In short, modeling support is the more effective way to test this conditional model of issue voting in the absence of experimental manipulations³.

I conduct such an analysis using National Election Study data from the 2004, 2008, and 2012 US presidential elections. The method I employ expands on the mixed model strategy of Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989), which allows for a direct comparison of the proximity and directional hypotheses within a single model. Before introducing the regression equation, it is necessary to formalize each of the “pure” models.

³ However, to demonstrate the robustness of the conditional model, chapter 4 will employ an experimental design to test for framing effects.

Recall from Chapter 2 that the directional model predicts the effect of issues on a voter's evaluation of a given candidate using the scalar product of the voter's positions and the candidate's positions relative to the neutral point. For a single issue, a voter's utility function is calculated using the formula:

$$Utility = (A - N) \times (X - N) \quad (1)$$

Where A is the candidate's position, X is the voter's position, and N is the neutral point. When summing across multiple issues, the distances of the voter's positions and the candidate's positions from the neutral point can be combined into two vectors (as illustrated in Figure 3-1), and the scalar product formula can be expressed in vector notation with the equation:

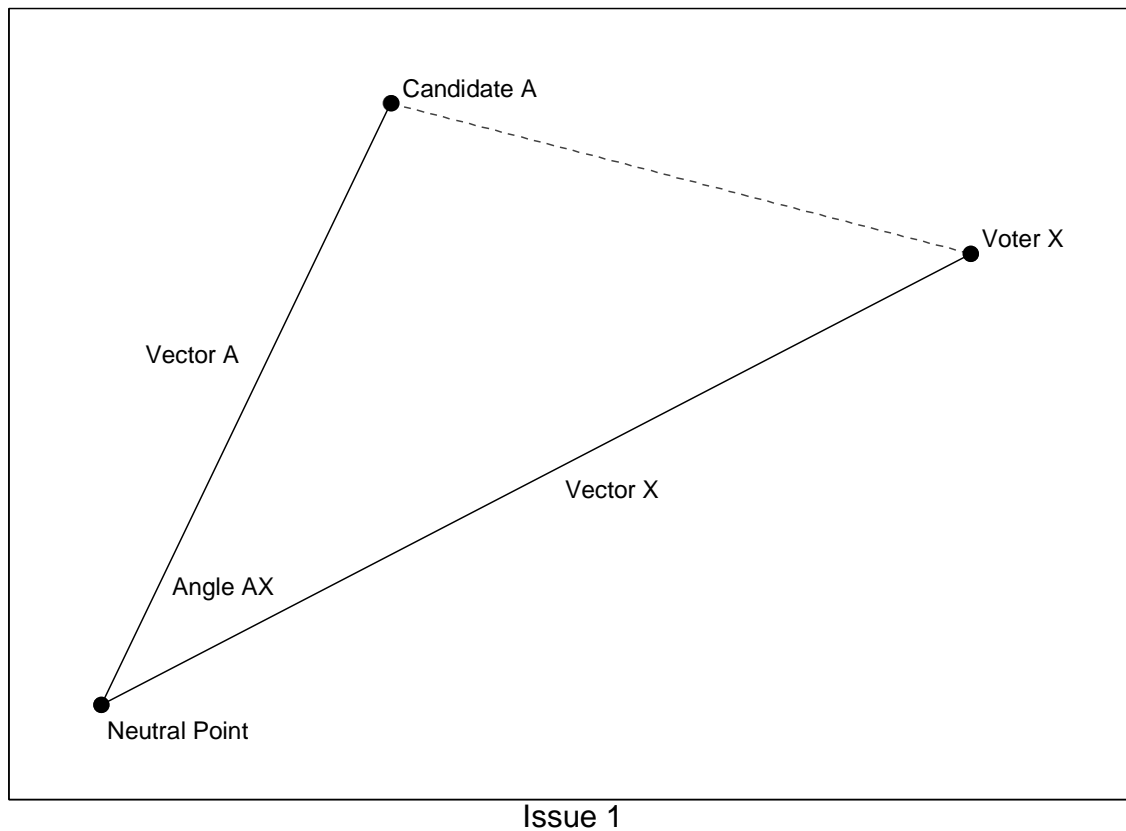
$$Scalar\ product = |A| |X| \cos AX \quad (2)$$

where |A| represents the length of the candidate vector in Figure 3-1 (i.e. the candidate's distance from the neutral point in multidimensional space), |X| represents the length of the voter vector (i.e. the voter's distance from the neutral point), and $\cos AX$ represents the cosine of the angle between vectors A and X – the vectors containing the candidate's and voter's issue positions, respectively⁴.

The proximity model, on the other hand, predicts the effect of an issue using the squared Euclidean distance between the voter's position and the candidate's position. Although there are multiple ways to calculate this distance in multidimensional space, and

⁴ For further explanations and proofs of this and other equations used to create the mixed model, please see Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989 (96-105).

Figure 3-1. Representation of Hypothetical Candidate and Voter in Two-Dimensional Issue Space



all valid methods should obviously produce identical results, a particularly useful formula for the squared distance between two points (in this case, the squared distance from the voter's position to the candidate's position), derived from the trigonometric Law of Cosines, is:

$$Euclidean\ Dist.^2 = |A|^2 + |X|^2 - 2|A| |X| \cos AX \quad (3)$$

The unique benefit of this particular version of the formula is that, as is apparent when comparing it with Equation 2, the third term ($2|A| |X| \cos AX$) is equal to two times the scalar product, which comprises the right side of the directional equation. If we then combine the first two terms ($|A|^2 + |X|^2$) into a single "length" component and incorporate

this equation into the regression model, then the coefficients on these components should adhere to a very predictable and testable pattern depending on whether the proximity or directional model provides the better empirical fit.

If we were to assume individual voters only use either proximity or directional voting, regardless of their psychological differences, the regression equation would be specified as:

$$Evaluation = b_0 + b_1 * length + b_2 * scalar + controls + error \quad (4)$$

where *Evaluation* measures each voter's positive or negative assessment of the candidate in question, *length* is equal to $-(|A|^2 + |X|^2)$ and *scalar* is equal to $2|A| |X| \cos AX$. The models can then be tested against one another by comparing the coefficient b_1 to the coefficient b_2 . If the proximity hypothesis is true, we would expect b_1 to equal b_2 , thus allowing us to factor out the two coefficients⁵ and make the regression equation equivalent to a pure proximity model as described by Equation 3. On the other hand, if the directional hypothesis is true, we would expect b_1 to be statistically indistinguishable from zero, thereby causing the length component to drop out and making the regression equation equivalent to a pure directional model⁶ as described by Equation 2.

⁵ For example, if $b_1 = b_2 = 3$, then:

$$\begin{aligned} Evaluation &= b_0 + 3 * length + 3 * scalar + controls + error \\ &= b_0 + 3 (length + scalar) + controls + error \\ &= b_0 + 3 (|A|^2 + |X|^2 - 2|A| |X| \cos AX) + controls + error \end{aligned}$$

Which is equivalent to a coefficient on the squared Euclidean distance formula from Equation 3, plus control variables and an error term, consistent with a proximity utility function.

⁶ For example, if $b_1 = 0$, then:

$$\begin{aligned} Evaluation &= b_0 + 0 * length + b_2 * scalar + controls + error \\ &= b_0 + b_2 * scalar + controls + error \\ &= b_0 + b_2 (|A| |X| \cos AX) + controls + error \end{aligned}$$

Which is equivalent to a coefficient on the scalar product term from Equation 2, plus control variables and an error term, consistent with a directional utility function.

However, because I predict the use of different models depending on the strength of voters' symbolic attachments for each issue, I include two separate length and scalar product components – one set for issues for which the voter has strong symbolic attachments, and one set for issues for which the voter has weaker symbolic attachments. Therefore, the regression equation I estimate is:

$$Eval = b_0 + b_1 length_{STRONG} + b_2 scalar_{STRONG} + b_3 length_{WEAK} + b_4 scalar_{WEAK} + controls + error \quad (5)$$

where $length_{STRONG}$ and $scalar_{STRONG}$ represent the length and scalar product components for issues with strong symbolic attachments for the voter, and where $length_{WEAK}$ and $scalar_{WEAK}$ represent the length and scalar product components for issues with weak symbolic attachments for the voter, respectively.

My hypothesis predicts that directional voting should be relatively more prominent when strong symbolic attachments are present, which we could recognize most easily if b_3 is significant and roughly equal to b_4 (making the “weak symbolic attachments” portion of the equation a pure proximity utility function) while b_1 is much smaller than b_2 and statistically insignificant (making the “strong symbolic attachments” portion of the equation a pure directional utility function). More generally, the conditional hypothesis predicts that the ratio $\frac{b_2}{b_1}$ should be greater than the ratio $\frac{b_4}{b_3}$.

Operationalization

The dependent variables are voters' evaluations of the four major party presidential candidates – George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004, John McCain and Barack Obama in 2008, and Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in 2012 – which I measure using the thermometer rating questions from the NES survey. I estimate a separate OLS regression model for each candidate.

Issue positions are taken from questions asking respondents to place themselves and the candidates on 7-point scales representing several different issue dimensions⁷. All issues were re-coded to range from -3 to +3, with the most liberal issue position coded as -3 and the most conservative issue position coded as +3. I measure voters' positions using their self-placement on these 7-point scales.

Measuring the candidates' positions, however, is a matter of some contention in the literature. Studies favoring the directional theory have typically used the mean placement of each candidate across all respondents, while studies favoring the proximity theory have used a voter-specific placement measured as each voter's subjective belief about the candidate's position. The measurement argument (see, eg. Gilljam 1997; Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1997; Pierce 1997) essentially amounts to a dispute over untestable theoretical assumptions. Unfortunately, this seemingly small aspect of model specification is often important enough to lead to opposite conclusions, which Lewis and King (1999) have described as a critical flaw in the evidence so far from this kind of data.

⁷ The issues included in this study are government spending, defense spending, guaranteed jobs, aid to blacks, and women's role. The criteria for including these issues and not others was based on the availability of feeling thermometer questions toward social groups that are obviously relatable to the issue, such as "the military" for the defense spending issue. The social group thermometers, as will be explained shortly, were used to measure symbolic attachments.

Therefore, I estimate each model twice for each candidate – once using mean placement, and once using individual placement to measure the candidate’s issue position. The results can then be assessed for robustness to these troublesome model specification decisions.

The actual length and scalar product terms were then created by averaging the appropriate quantities across all issues for which the voter has either weak or strong symbolic attachments. For the length term, the calculation is $-1 * \sum (x_{ij}^2 + a_{kj}^2) / n_i$, where x_{ij}^2 refers to the squared score of each respondent i on each issue j , a_{kj}^2 refers to the squared position of each candidate k on issue j (measured either with mean placement or individual placement), and n_i refers to the total number of issues for which the voter has weak or strong symbolic attachments. For the scalar product term for important issues, the calculation is $2 * \sum (x_{ij} * a_{kj}) / n_i$. Note that the signs of the length and scalar product terms have been reversed from those in Equation 3 in order to make the expected coefficients positive. This step should make the interpretation of the results more straightforward, but not affect the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Symbolic attachments are measured using survey questions about respondents’ affective connections toward various symbols that are relevant to each issue. Recall that in the literature, “political symbols” refer to things like parties, ideologies, and social groups. Because my theory suggests that a voter can use any individual issue(s) differently from the rest, and because party ID and ideology are fixed across all issues, I incorporate symbolic attachments into the model by focusing on voters’ orientations toward social groups that are particularly relevant to each issue. The variable is therefore derived from a

series of thermometer rating questions that gauge the respondent's warmth toward two social groups that are closely related to each issue in the model⁸.

The raw thermometer scores range from 0 to 100, with 50 representing feelings that are neither warm nor cold toward the group in question. I first re-centered the group thermometer scores at the neutral position such that positive numbers indicated favorable affect and negative numbers indicated unfavorable affect. Next, I took the absolute value of each re-centered score, such that higher numbers indicated stronger affect (whether positive or negative) and lower numbers indicated weaker affect. I then took the average of these values for the two groups associated with each issue, indicating the strength of each voter's symbolic affect toward each issue. Finally, if a voter's symbolic affect score ranked at or above the 75th percentile of all voters on that issue, the voter was coded to have "strong symbolic attachments" for the issue; otherwise, the voter was coded to have "weak symbolic attachments." In this manner, each voter's attachments were categorized as either strong or weak on each different issue and the length and scalar product components of the regression equation were divided according to this categorization.

Finally, the controls included in the model were ideology, party, age, marital status, religious attendance, union household, and region.

⁸ For Aid to Blacks, the groups are Blacks and Welfare Recipients (see Gilens 1996; 2009; and Jacoby 2000). For Jobs, the groups are Poor People and Big Business. For Defense Spending, the groups are the Military and Muslims. For Government Spending, the groups are Federal Government and Congress. For Women's Role, the groups are Feminists and Women. In 2008, the Women group thermometer was not included in the NES survey, so the variable in those models only uses the question about Feminists.

Results

To reiterate, we should observe a specific pattern of coefficients depending on whether the directional or proximity theory best describes voters' evaluations under a given set of conditions. When the length and scalar product coefficients are roughly equal to one another, the results point to proximity voting. When the scalar product coefficient is significantly larger than the length coefficient, the results point to directional voting – especially if the length coefficient is not statistically significant.

Table 3-1 displays the results of the twelve OLS regression models. Although the evidence is somewhat mixed, the general picture strongly supports the conditional hypothesis. In seven of the twelve models – including five of the six performed using respondents' individual placement of the candidates – the significance tests on the coefficients behave exactly as predicted. That is, the scalar product component is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level for both strong and weak symbolic attachments while the length component is significant for weak symbolic attachments only. This indicates that, consistent with expectations, respondents generally evaluated the candidates directionally on issues for which they possessed strong symbolic attachments, and evaluated the candidates proximately on issues for which their symbolic attachments were weaker.

In two other cases – Bush and Kerry in 2004 with mean placement – the tests do not conform precisely to this pattern, but still basically support the conditional hypothesis. For Bush, the length component is still not significant for weak symbolic attachments, yet the ratio of the scalar product coefficient to the length coefficient (3.39) is much smaller on than it is for strong symbolic attachments (9.89). Thus, voters' evaluation of Bush on the

Table 3-1. Spatial Voting Effects in a Mixed Model Analysis of Candidate Evaluation

<i>Mean Placement of Candidate Position</i>			<i>Individual Placement of Candidate Position</i>		
Candidate Evaluation Models	Parameter Estimates	Sig. Level	Candidate Evaluation Models	Parameter Estimates	Sig. Level
Bush 2004			Bush 2004		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.88 (.56)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.08 (.21)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.19 (.40)	.64	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.28 (.24)	.25
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.39 (.48)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.96 (.21)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.41 (.40)	.31	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.69 (.24)	.00
R ²	.542		R ²	.649	
Kerry 2004			Kerry 2004		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.51 (.53)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.18 (.23)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.49 (.37)	.19	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.31 (.32)	.20
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.55 (.44)	.21	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.98 (.20)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.86 (.33)	.01	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.90 (.23)	.00
R ²	.484		R ²	.586	
Obama 2008			Obama 2008		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.08 (.36)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.58 (.21)	.01
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.69 (.30)	.02	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.42 (.19)	.03
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	2.51 (.69)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.44 (.24)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.62 (.51)	.00	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.88 (.30)	.00
R ²	.578		R ²	.673	
McCain 2008			McCain 2008		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.13 (.46)	.02	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.54 (.21)	.01
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	-.08 (.27)	.75	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.01 (.20)	.98
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.37 (.53)	.03	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.01 (.22)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.05 (.48)	.03	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.00 (.30)	.00
R ²	.312		R ²	.452	
Obama 2012			Obama 2012		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	1.16 (.18)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.58 (.09)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	-.07 (.14)	.64	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	-.02 (.09)	.84
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	2.01 (.24)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.44 (.11)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.95 (.21)	.00	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.78 (.12)	.00
R ²	.605		R ²	.649	
Romney 2012			Romney 2012		
<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.19 (.18)	.28	<i>Scalar</i> <i>STRONG</i>	.41 (.10)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	-.14 (.15)	.36	<i>Length</i> <i>STRONG</i>	-.01 (.09)	.89
<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.21 (.21)	.00	<i>Scalar</i> <i>WEAK</i>	1.21 (.11)	.00
<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	-.16 (.23)	.49	<i>Length</i> <i>WEAK</i>	.82 (.13)	.00
R ²	.554		R ²	.587	

Robust standard errors listed in parentheses. Significance level is $P > |t|$.

Note: Control variables are omitted from this table but were included in the analysis.

basis of the issues on which they had weak symbolic attachments at least appear *closer* to proximity voting on average than they do with issues on which they had strong symbolic attachments, even if it still wasn't enough to actually look like a *pure* proximity model.

For Kerry, the scalar product component is not significant for weak symbolic attachments, yet the coefficient on this variable is very close to that on the length component (recall from earlier that under pure proximity voting, these coefficients would be exactly equal to one another). In fact, a Wald test suggests that these coefficients are not statistically different from one another at all, while the opposite is true for the two coefficients for strong symbolic attachments in this model. Thus, this case still seems to favor the conditional hypothesis. Moreover, these relatively minor shortcomings in the evidence disappear entirely in the corresponding individual-placement models for the same candidates, suggesting that these problems – unlike the evidence favoring the conditional hypothesis – are not robust to model specification.

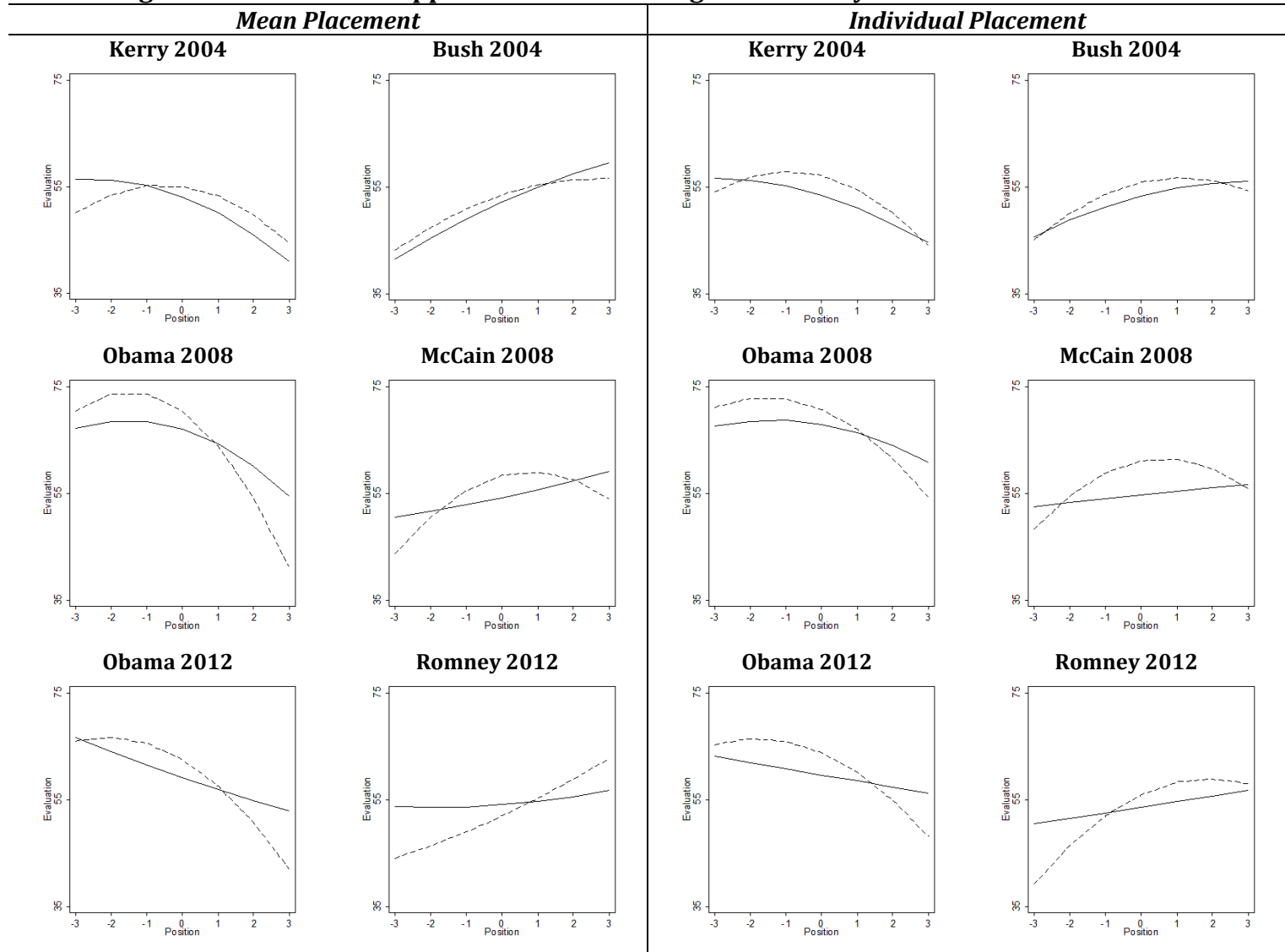
This leaves three cases left to consider. The mean placement model for Mitt Romney in 2012, in which most of the independent variables of interest are statistically insignificant, does not seem to indicate much evidence of issue voting at all for issues with strong symbolic attachments and points to directional voting for issues with weak symbolic attachments, but these results are not robust to model specification. In the individual placement model for Romney, the results conform perfectly to expectations. Finally, Barack Obama in 2008 is the only candidate who shows no strong evidence for the conditional hypothesis, regardless of model specification. The ratio of the scalar product coefficient estimate to the length coefficient estimate is almost exactly equal for strong and weak symbolic attachments.

In short, despite a few discrepancies, the model results are strongly consistent the conditional hypothesis for five out of six candidates, and in four of these five cases the evidence is robust to model specification. The dispute over mean placement and individual placement may have plagued the debate between the pure directional and proximity models, but the results here hold up quite well under either measurement approach.

The parameter estimates and significance tests are sufficient to demonstrate the success of the theory, but they may not be very intuitive to interpret at first glance. Therefore, to provide greater clarity, I use the regression equations to plot predicted support curves for each candidate, for strong and weak symbolic attachments. Recall from Figure 2-4 that a peaked, symmetric support curve is consistent with proximity voting, while a monotonic, closely linear curve is consistent with directional voting. If my conditional model provides a good empirical fit, then, we should see something closer to a diagonal line for strong symbolic attachments and something closer to a symmetric curve for weak symbolic attachments.

Figure 3-2 shows the support curves for all six candidates under each model specification, and the results are largely consistent with expectations. The effect is most stark for John McCain – whether using mean placement or individual placement, the curve for weak symbolic attachments (indicated by a dashed line) is strongly reminiscent of the parabolic shape predicted by the proximity theory, while the curve for strong symbolic attachments (indicated by a solid line) decreases monotonically as the voter becomes more liberal and is almost perfectly linear. The trend is somewhat less pronounced, yet still apparent, for nearly every candidate with either model specification – the curves for weak

Figure 3-2. Predicted Support Curves for Strong and Weak Symbolic Attachments



Solid line = strong symbolic attachments, dashed line = weak symbolic attachments.

Profile is a moderate independent with all other variables at their means

symbolic attachments are almost uniformly more parabolic and symmetrical, while the curves for strong symbolic attachments are straighter and monotonic (or very nearly so).

The predicted curves seem to pass the “eyeball test,” but we can also go a step further and quantify the degree to which each curve approximates directional or proximity voting. Because the R^2 statistic measures the strength of the *linear* relationship between two variables, and because pure directional voting is characterized by a perfectly linear support curve, the R^2 value for each of the curves in Figure 3-2 may also be interpreted as a measure of the extent to which directional voting explains voting behavior under the conditions specified. An R^2 of exactly 1 would indicate perfect directional voting, while an R^2 of exactly 0 could – if the support curve is shaped as theorized – indicate perfect proximity voting⁹.

Table 3-2 displays the R^2 value for each predicted support curve, calculated by squaring the correlation coefficient between the hypothetical voter positions (ranging from -3 to +3) and the predicted thermometer scores for each candidate, for both strong and weak symbolic attachments. In almost every case, the R^2 value is greater than .9 – and often as high as .99 – for strong symbolic attachments, indicating almost perfect linearity. The average R^2 value for strong symbolic attachments, across all candidates and all model specifications, is .918, and no more than slight differences are observable between mean placement and individual placement. For weak symbolic attachments, the R^2 values are

⁹ Because the values of the x-axes in Figure 3-2 are bounded at -3 and +3 by the wording of the question in the NES Survey, R^2 values of exactly 0 are unrealistic in this case. The limited range of the variable essentially truncates one tail of the parabola more than the other, creating an imbalance with the effect of inflating the R^2 . Presumably, if the range of the x-axes continued to infinity and the observed trends continued outside through the expanded range, each of the R^2 values I calculate for the parabolically-shaped curves would be much smaller. However, because there are no observations in the data with such values, this would require making out-of-sample projections, which are inherently dubious. My calculations only include issue positions within the observed range, thereby providing a more conservative test of the theory.

Table 3-2. Change in Linearity of Predicted Support Curves Due to Symbolic Attachments

Candidate	Model Specification	R^2 (<i>Strong Symbolic Attachments</i>)	R^2 (<i>Weak Symbolic Attachments</i>)	Change (<i>Strong - Weak</i>)
Bush 2004	Mean placement	.988	.908	+ .080
Bush 2004	Self placement	.929	.627	+ .302
Kerry 2004	Mean placement	.903	.279	+ .625
Kerry 2004	Self placement	.934	.539	+ .395
McCain 2008	Mean placement	.990	.471	+ .518
McCain 2008	Self placement	.999	.349	+ .651
Obama 2008	Mean placement	.755	.751	+ .003
Obama 2008	Self placement	.711	.770	- .059
Romney 2012	Mean placement	.815	.992	- .178
Romney 2012	Self placement	.999	.830	+ .170
Obama 2008	Mean placement	.998	.855	+ .143
Obama 2008	Self placement	.999	.818	+ .181
Average		.918	.682	+ .236

almost uniformly lower, sometimes quite substantially so. The average R^2 for these curves is .682, indicating a substantial reduction in linearity when moving from strong to weak symbolic attachments. In only two of the twelve models is the predicted support curve more closely linear for weak symbolic attachments, and neither of those instances are robust to model specification.

The overall picture provides strong support for the conditional hypothesis: on those issues where voters possess strong emotional attachments or aversions to political symbols, they appear to use directional voting. On those issues where voters have only weak symbolic attachments, they engage in something much closer to proximity voting.

Discussion

The results presented here do not entirely lack ambiguity. The significance tests do not favor exactly the same conclusion from one candidate to the next, and some differences still arise from changes in measurement of the candidates' positions. However, the totality of the evidence does seem to suggest that voters employ significantly different criteria when evaluating candidates on the basis of issues depending on the strength of their symbolic attachments or aversions. If the evidence is not strong enough to powerfully confirm the conditional hypothesis, it should at least suggest that researchers would be well advised to consider heterogeneity in the way voters think about different issues when choosing between spatial models. And, it seems that – as hypothesized – voters' symbolic attachments are a powerful source of that heterogeneity at least a good amount of the time.

The Stimulus Matters

Although some general trends are discernible from these results, there is also evidence that the degree to which voters bring proximity or directional consideration to bear on their political evaluations – and the power of other factors to make these different types of considerations more important – may change somewhat, depending on the stimulus (e.g. the candidate being evaluated). Most obviously, the ratio of the length component to the scalar product component differs from one candidate to the next, such that some candidates seem to be evaluated much more on the basis of Proximity considerations than other candidates. Symbolic attachments seem to matter for most candidates, but perhaps not (or at least less apparently so) for others. Future researchers might attempt to explain this variability by assessing various candidate-level

characteristics, such as personality, rhetoric, incumbency, voter familiarity, or time in office. For instance, Cho and Endersby (2003) found, looking at election surveys from Great Britain, that voters use proximity processes more to evaluate governing incumbent parties, but evaluate opposition parties using more directional processes.

Directional vs. Proximity

Speaking to the broader debate between directional and proximity theorists, these results would seem to indicate for perhaps the first time that each model may be appropriate under a predictable set of circumstances, which can vary between and even *within* individuals. This finding seems to hold for almost every candidate, and is largely robust to the model specification problems that Lewis and King (1999) criticize. Strong symbolic attachments seem to be associated with directional voting, and weak symbolic attachments seem to be associated more with proximity voting, regardless of whether we use mean placement or individual placement of the candidates' issue position.

Scholars have pondered the possibility of heterogeneous issue voting for decades, and the major contribution of this chapter is that it not only demonstrates but *explains* the existence of this heterogeneity. The very same orientations toward symbolic politics described in *The American Voter* seem to influence the way people incorporate issue positions when evaluating candidates in an election. To the extent that voters have strong attachments or aversions to political symbols, they may be either unable or unwilling to make the sort of complex, unemotional policy calculations that proximity voting requires. Instead, they view issues in a diffuse sense of policy directions and react with strong feelings toward stimuli on one side or the other of the issue.

Although further research is still needed, there is good reason to believe this conditional model of issue voting has promise. Theoretically, the conditional model closely follows previous research on issue attitudes and symbolic politics. Empirically, the model's falsifiable predictions held up fairly well to empirical testing under the model specifications most favorable to each theory. Practically, the model has the potential to explain the outstanding puzzle of heterogeneity and suggests fruitful and testable lines of inquiry for future research. When it comes to studies of issue voting, scholars should begin to look beyond the paradigms of the pure spatial models and carefully consider the possibility that under conditions that favor symbolic or technical thinking, voters may apply different criteria when they evaluate candidates' issue positions.

CHAPTER 4

FRAMING AND IMAGERY

In chapter 3 I established that the same individual could engage in either directional or proximity voting with a given issue, depending on the strength of his or her relevant symbolic attachments. This was an insight into the issue voting process from the vantage point of the individual voter, and it might be tempting to just stop there, as many studies of vote choice do. Yet in reality, voters are not the only people with goals and decisions to make in an election. A political campaign also entails countless actions taken by strategic elites who – at least in theory – have the power to influence voters' decisions in order to encourage their own preferred outcomes. This chapter focuses on what elites (especially candidates and their campaigns) can do to influence the issue voting process.

It is certainly clear that candidates can engage in strategic position-taking or persuasion to increase their chances of victory, and the optimal strategy follows naturally from the vote choice models themselves. To win over voters who are using proximity voting, take a position as close as possible to their ideal points, or persuade them to shift their ideal points to match your own. To win over voters who are using directional voting, take a strong position on the same side of the issue as the voters, or persuade them to shift their ideal point in the direction of your own. Either way, the logic is to try and somehow

configure the issue positions of the actors to optimally fit the choice process being applied. But is it possible to do the inverse – to alter the *choice process* to optimally fit the issue positions of the actors? Could a moderate candidate induce proximity voting or an extreme candidate induce directional voting to create an advantage?

Under the traditional assumption that being a proximity or directional voter is a fixed trait, there would be no reason to expect so – one either *is* a proximity voter or is not, and that’s the end of it. However, the insights of chapter 3 and my conditional model of issue voting imply otherwise. When voters evaluated a candidate on the basis of an issue for which they had strong attachments or aversions to related political symbols, they behaved like directional voters. Yet in the absence of those symbolic attachments, it wasn’t that the issue automatically didn’t matter. Instead, they behaved more like proximity voters – or at least, enough people did that issue proximity significantly predicted candidate thermometer ratings in most cases. This suggests that voters could possess at least two different sets of issue considerations: one set of proximity considerations, and another set of directional considerations. If each consideration behaves consistent with Zaller’s (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample model of mass opinion, then external factors might be able to increase the likelihood that one type of consideration or the other will be brought to the “top of the mind” for use when making a political judgment.

Let us return briefly to the comparison between choosing a candidate and choosing a consumer product. If elections are shopping trips in the marketplace of ideas, then voters can be thought of as the customers and elites as the marketing gurus, pitching their products in ways carefully designed to make them as enticing as possible. To fully understand a consumer’s decision to buy a particular breakfast cereal or tube of

toothpaste, it is constructive to consider not only characteristics of the buyer and the product itself, but also the way the product has been packaged and pitched. Likewise, to understand a voter's decision to support a particular candidate, it may be constructive to consider not only the candidates' issue positions themselves, but also the way those positions have been presented to the voter.

Political behavior scholars have identified a number of communication strategies that can influence the political evaluations of those who receive them. Two such strategies which have received particular attention are the use of frames – i.e., the specific words, phrases, and styles used to present an issue and define it for others – and symbolic imagery – i.e., graphics which reference politically relevant social groups and value preferences.

In this chapter, I argue that those who communicate messages about political issues – eg. the media, opinion leaders, and the candidates themselves, among others – can strategically manipulate the frames and images they employ when expressing otherwise equivalent information in order to induce proximity or directional voting. I demonstrate this process with results from an original survey experiment in which respondents were asked to evaluate a pair of fictional Congressional candidates, and where the type of imagery and message framing varied across four treatment groups. Although the results require a nuanced interpretation, they do provide compelling evidence that the way candidates' issue positions are presented to voters can make them systematically more likely to engage in either proximity or directional voting. This suggests that issue voting processes are not as unchanging as once believed – instead, they are conditioned by context and strategically manipulable. The implications for both researchers and practitioners of politics should not be ignored.

A Formal Conception of Strategic Manipulation

To reiterate, my conditional model of issue voting posits that proximity voting is a product of technical considerations, while directional voting is a product of symbolic considerations. Each voter possesses a unique combination of both types of considerations, and certain external stimuli could potentially affect the salience of a symbolic or technical consideration coming to mind. Presently, I will consider the proposition that political messages received from the media or from elites could – whether strategically or inadvertently – employ priming and framing effects to make a certain type of consideration more cognitively accessible to a voter.

Formally, we can represent a voter's attitude toward an object – in this case, toward a given candidate's issue position – as the weighted sum of a set of evaluative considerations about the object (Chong and Druckman 2007; Fishbein 1980), such that:

$$Evaluation = \sum v_i * w_i , \quad (1)$$

where v_i is the utility the individual attaches to the candidate on the basis of consideration i , w_i is the “salience weight” of the consideration, and $\sum w_i = 1$. The proximity and directional theories of issue voting each postulate a different utility function describing how voters translate issue positions into personal utility, and these functions can be incorporated into Equation 1 as different values of v_i .

My conditional model of issue voting suggests that if the hypothetical first consideration ($i=1$) is based on proximity reasoning, then the predicted value of v_1 would

be determined using the proximity utility function, which is based on the squared Euclidean distance between the voter's ideal point and the candidate's position:

$$v_1 = \beta_0^P - \beta_1^P (A - X)^2, \quad (2)$$

where A is the candidate's issue position and X is the voter's ideal point.

On the other hand, if the next consideration ($i=2$) is based on directional thinking, then the predicted value of v_2 would be determined using the directional utility function, which is based on the scalar product of the voter's ideal point and the candidate's position:

$$v_2 = \beta_0^d + \beta_1^d ((A - N)(X - N)), \quad (3)$$

where N is the neutral point and the remaining variables are the same as in Equation 2.

Substituting Equations 2 and 3 into Equation 1 gives us the formal expected-value model for an issue attitude, with weighted proximity and directional considerations:

$$Evaluation = [\beta_0^P - \beta_1^P (A - X)^2] * w_1 + [\beta_0^d + \beta_1^d ((A - N)(X - N))] * w_2 \quad (4)$$

Within this framework, if a voter already possesses both proximity and directional considerations¹⁰, then images and framing in communication can exert influence on a

¹⁰ Recall from the previous chapter that considerations must be available in one's memory in order to be accessed. Individuals cannot sample a consideration they do not possess in the first place.

voter's evaluation of a candidate's issue position by either altering the salience weights (w_i) on the underlying utility functions.

Still, the question remains: by what mechanism can the way an issue position is presented influence the salience of evaluative dimensions? The answer begins with the observation that in order to be retrieved from memory, a particular consideration must be *accessible* (Higgins 1996). The concept of accessibility refers to how much time and effort it takes to bring a consideration to the top of the head for us in making an evaluation. According to Zaller (1992), "The accessibility of any given consideration depends on a stochastic sampling process, where considerations that have been recently thought about are somewhat more likely to be sampled" (586). Factors – including frames and images – which have caused an individual to think about a consideration regularly or recently increase the accessibility of the consideration (Bargh, Lombardi, and Tota 1986; Bargh and Tota 1988), and therefore its salience.

Thus, I expect that simply getting an individual to think about proximity or directional concerns when presenting information about an issue could increase the likelihood of the individual engaging in that type of voting. For instance, a communicator could prime voters' symbolic attachments to induce directional voting by employing imagery with strong symbolic content that stirs up positive or negative affect toward social groups and value perspectives that are relevant to the issue at hand. By calling to mind the voter's gut-level attachments and aversions, symbolic images could bring such considerations to the top of the voter's mind. When asked to make a decision, the voter would then be more likely to view the political world as "us versus them" – divided into teams of supporters seeking to move public policy in opposite directions. Then, they would

call on these affective attachments and prefer issue positions on their team over issue positions on the enemy team, and therefore engage in directional voting.

On the other hand, presenting the candidates' issue positions in a manner devoid of symbolic or emotional content should favor proximity voting, since voters' thoughts about the issue would be based less on affective attachments and more on objective assessments of information. These predictions establish the first hypothesis I test in this chapter:

H₁: Voters are more likely to engage in *directional* voting if they have been exposed to images with *strong* symbolic content, and more likely to engage in *proximity* voting if they have been exposed to images with *weak* symbolic content.

By the same token, a communicator could potentially use selective framing to encourage proximity or directional voting by expressing information about a candidate's issue position in a conducive format. Describing it in specific, absolute terms (e.g. "Candidate X believes abortions should be illegal except in cases of rape, incest, and when the mother's health is in danger") should increase the likelihood of proximity voting because that activity requires people to view the issue in a sharp positional manner. Describing a candidate's issue position relative to a neutral point and emphasizing directionality (e.g. "Candidate X believes we should place much stronger restrictions on abortions than we have now") should increase the likelihood of directional voting because that requires people's thinking to adhere to a direction-intensity paradigm. These predictions lead to the second hypothesis I test in this paper:

H₂: Voters are more likely to engage in *proximity* voting if information about candidates' issue positions has been framed in *relative* terms, and more likely to engage in *directional* voting if the information has been framed in *absolute* terms.

An original survey experiment provides the means for testing these hypotheses; the design of the experiment is described in the following section.

Experimental Design

I conducted an internet-based experiment whereby the respondents were asked to evaluate a pair of hypothetical candidates for a non-specific Congressional seat on the basis of their positions on welfare spending. The advantage of using this particular issue is that it is readily conducive to both symbolic (e.g. sympathy for needy families, racial resentment, aversion to “welfare queens”) and technical considerations (e.g. fiscal policy and budgetary concerns), and positions can be easily expressed in either absolute (e.g. “Candidate X wants to spend 15% of the federal budget on aid to the poor”) or relative terms (e.g. “Candidate X wants to increase federal spending on aid to the poor by 5%”). Moreover, concerns about unemployment, the national debt, income equality, and the proper role of government were all considered by voters among the most important issues of the 2012 election (Newport 2012). So although the generalizability of this study may be limited by its reliance on just one issue, the issue is nevertheless almost ideally useful for this study.

Participants were drawn from two sources: from students in introductory American government courses at a major university in the midwestern United States, and from a crowdsourcing website that allows requesters to recruit internet users to conduct various

tasks, such as filing out a survey. The experiment followed a 2 x 2 design, whereby respondents were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups, where they viewed images with either strong or weak symbolic content, and where candidates' issue positions were framed in either relative or absolute terms.

In the first stage of the experiment, respondents were presented with a set of four images according to their randomly assigned treatment group, and asked to rate them on a feeling thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 100. Images with high symbolic content depicted a homeless man, a child in threadbare clothing, a hard-working farmer, and a black family in the waiting room of a welfare office. The images with low symbolic content included a table, a calculator, a banana, and a nondescript off-white building.

Next, they were asked a self-placement question to determine their positions on welfare spending. The question asked, "Experts say the federal government is expected to spend a total of about \$3.8 trillion in 2013. Of that \$3.8 trillion, how much would you say the government should spend on programs to help poor people?" Answer choices ranged from 0% to 100% of the federal budget, rounded off to every 5%. A battery of "need for cognition" questions (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996) then provided a distraction task, following which the information about the candidates was presented.

In order to isolate the effects of issue considerations, the only information respondents received about the candidates was their names and positions on welfare spending levels. The candidates' names were chosen to be ordinary and of equal length, while their true issue positions were configured in order to present every respondent with

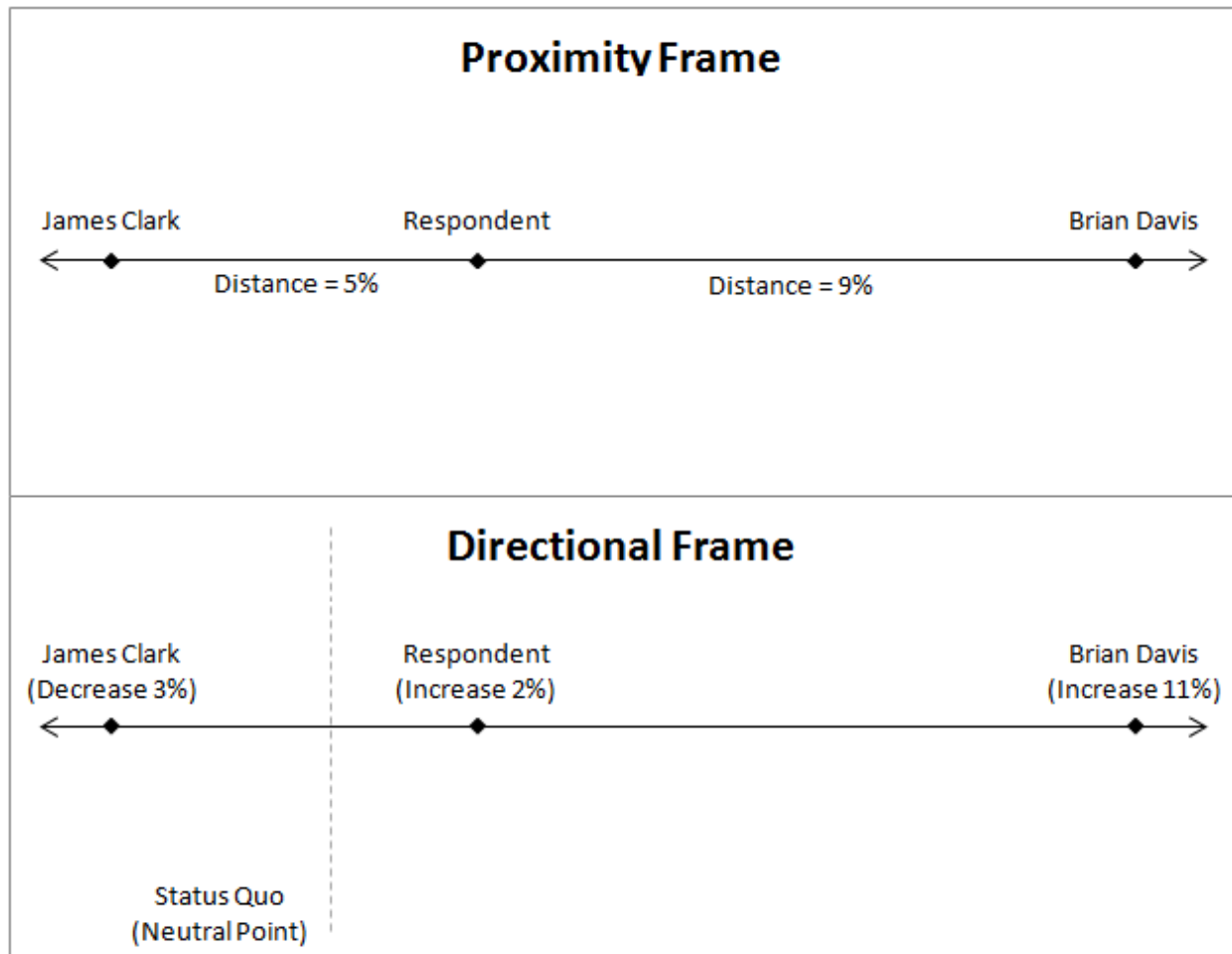
a pair of alternatives that would differentiate between the two theories.¹¹ The relative orientation of the candidates' positions to the respondent's position, as illustrated in Figure 4-1, was constant across all individuals such that objectively identical information was presented to each respondent, regardless of the treatment group. One candidate – the more proximate one – was assigned an issue position equal to five percentage points *below* the respondent's position, while the other candidate was assigned an issue position equal to nine percentage points *above* the respondent's position.¹² Therefore, a voter who is engaging in proximity voting ought to prefer the first candidate every time¹³.

¹¹ This is one reason an experimental design is particularly useful, because – as described in chapter 3 – in the real world the directional and proximity theories make identical predictions of vote choice for a large number of voters and candidates. Studies of real life elections often cannot easily differentiate between the two types of voting for a major subset of the electorate, but with an experiment we can artificially construct the candidates' issue positions specifically to present each voter with a choice between a proximity candidate and a directional candidate. This artificial manipulation also avoids the need to make costly assumptions about the "true" location of candidates' positions (see Lewis and King 1999).

¹² Because allocating less than 0% or more than 100% of the budget would be an unrealistic scenario, this meant I could not use this same candidate placement method for respondents who thought the United States should spend 0%, 95%, or 100% of the budget on aid to the poor. These respondents – a total of 23 people – were therefore omitted from the analyses.

¹³ It may be said that this operationalization is unfair to the directional model because its theory conceives of "extremism" in terms of the intensity of emotions stirred by a candidate with respect to the issue rather than extremity in the policy itself. Directional voters might therefore not *necessarily* prefer the candidate who wants to spend a lot more on aid to the poor than they do. This is a valid criticism and reason to view this as a conservative measure of directional voting. However, the design still provides a useful test of the theory, for four reasons: First, given that the two candidates were presented identically in every way except their names and issue positions, these are the only possible aspects of the stimuli to which any respondent might have responded emotionally. Assuming nobody had a particular affinity for the particular names themselves, it is therefore likely that to the extent one candidate stirred more intense emotions than the other, it was the extreme candidate who stirred stronger emotions. Moreover, since one candidate was placed on the same side of the issue as most or all respondents and the other candidate was placed in the opposite direction (see Footnote 14), the directional theory would predict a preference for the same candidate regardless of extremity. Second, even if a vote for the extreme candidate is not a demonstrably directional vote, it is most certainly NOT a proximity vote. At the very least, the experiment can be interpreted to test what makes respondents less likely to vote proximately. Third, as will be discussed more in chapter 6, the model results which will be presented in Tables 4-1 and 4-2 indicate that expressing a preference for the extreme candidate is significantly predicted by variables which are theoretically related to the directional theory but have no apparent theoretical connection to other issue voting models. Fourth, the results are corroborated by a separate question that directly asked a subset of respondents how they evaluate candidates on the basis of issues. Possible answer choices included a description of proximity voting, a description of directional voting, "it depends on the context," and a "none of the above" response. Both the conditional hypothesis and the prominence of directional voting over proximity were validated by the responses to this question, as presented in Figure 4-4.

Figure 4-1. Experimental Candidate Positions Relative to Respondent Self-Placement, Compared Across Proximity and Directional Frames



The candidates' issue positions were expressed in one of two different ways, applying what Druckman (2001) refers to as *equivalency framing* – “the use of different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases (eg. 5% unemployment or 95% employment, 97% fat-free or 3% fat)” (228). Respondents assigned to the Proximity Frame treatment groups were told the specific percentage of the federal budget each candidate thinks the country should spend on helping the poor. In the Directional Frame treatment groups, the respondents were told to suppose the federal government currently spends two

percentage points less than their preferred amount. As shown in Figure 4-1, this means each respondent would want to *increase* government welfare spending by two percent of the budget, the more proximate candidate would want to *decrease* welfare spending by three percent, and the less proximate candidate would want to increase welfare spending by eleven percent. Thus, although the first candidate may be more proximate to the respondent, he wishes to move policy in the opposite direction. And while the second candidate may be less proximate, he wishes to move policy in the same direction as the respondent. Therefore, a voter who is engaging in directional voting ought to prefer the second candidate.¹⁴ Thus, from here on the first candidate will be referred to as the “proximity candidate” while the second will be referred to as the “directional candidate.”

Respondents were asked to evaluate each candidate separately using the feeling thermometer, and then to choose the candidate for whom they would vote if the election were held today. Questions about race, gender, party identification, and need for cognition (one NFC item asked whether the respondent likes having the responsibility of handling a situation that requires lots of thinking, and another asked whether the respondent prefers solving complex or simple problems) were also included to serve as controls.

To reiterate, the hypotheses generated by my Conditional Model of Issue Voting predict that respondents should be *less* likely to prefer the proximate candidate and more

¹⁴ Even in the absence of the directional frame that explicitly places each candidate on opposite sides of the artificial neutral point, this second candidate should still constitute a directional choice for most respondents. Gilens (1999, 28) found that a majority of Americans believe spending should be increased on almost every social welfare program, and that 71% believe spending should be increased to fight poverty as long as the loaded word “welfare” is not specifically invoked. Additionally, more than 56% of the respondents in my sample identify with the Democratic party (including independent leaners). Taken together, these facts make it reasonable to assume that the vast majority of individuals in the sample favor greater spending on aid to the poor. The directional theory would therefore predict that they should prefer the candidate who takes the strongest possible position in that same direction – in this case, the candidate who wishes to spend the most money on this issue, which would be the candidate located nine percentage points above the respondent.

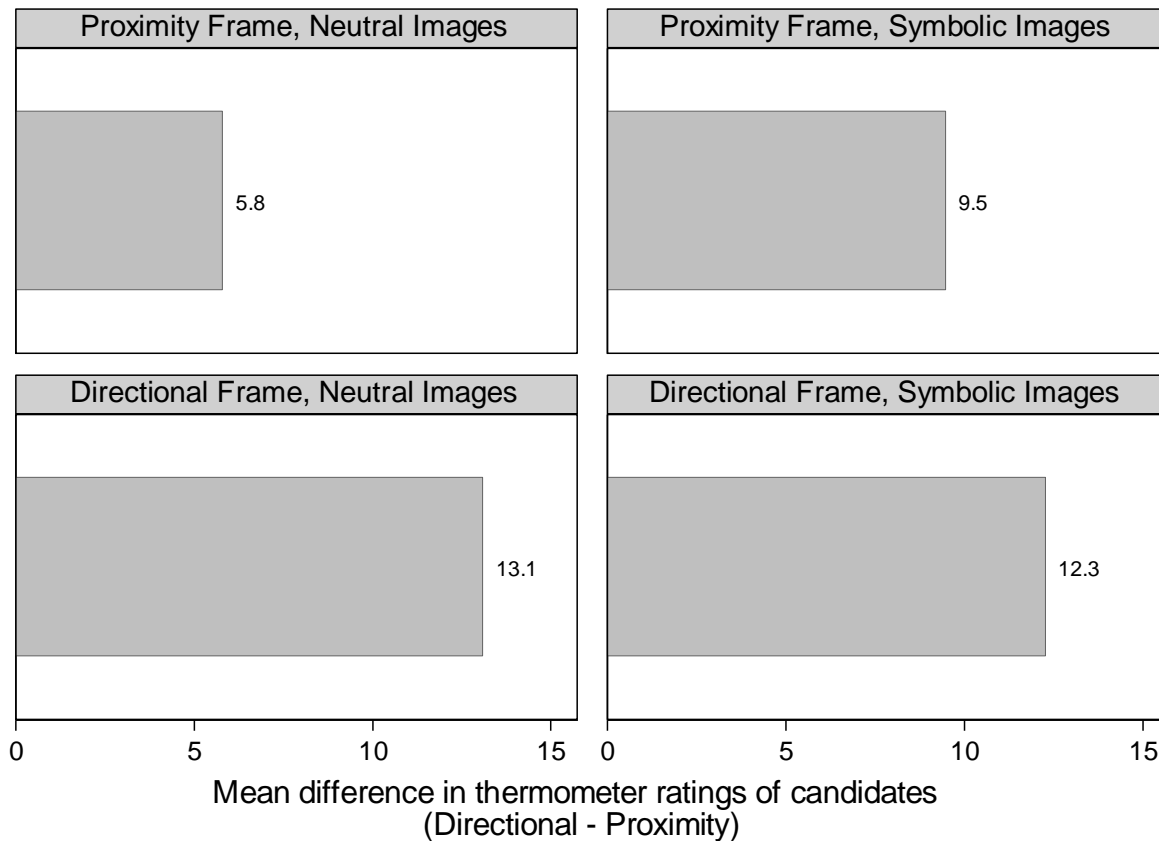
likely to prefer the extreme candidate when they have been exposed to images with high symbolic content and when the candidates' issue positions have been framed in relative terms. The results of the survey experiment are analyzed in the following section.

Summary of Responses by Treatment Group

We can take a rudimentary look at the underlying dynamics just by comparing the average respondent's candidate evaluations across each of the four treatment groups. These are presented in Figure 4-2, which displays the mean difference in respondents' thermometer ratings of the two candidates. Scores were calculated by subtracting each respondent's rating of the proximity candidate from his or her rating of the directional candidate, so positive values indicate a stronger preference for the directional candidate.

Here, a few interesting observations already come to light. The first thing that stands out is that *in every treatment group*, the directional candidate was rated more highly than the proximity candidate. Even under the conditions I theorized would be most conducive to proximity voting, the typical respondent expressed a clear preference for the candidate whose issue position was farther away from them, directly contradicting the central tenet of proximity voting. This stands in contrast to previous experimental studies (e.g. Claassen 2007; Lacy and Paolino 2010; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008), which have tended to favor proximity voting strongly. This is, to my knowledge, the first experimental evidence that conclusively favors directional voting overall. And although it is only preliminary, that itself may provide some beginning evidence that issue voting processes are conditional on contextual factors, because some aspect of the way the information was

Figure 4-2. Bar Charts of Directional Candidate's Advantage in Thermometer Ratings, Compared Across Treatment Groups



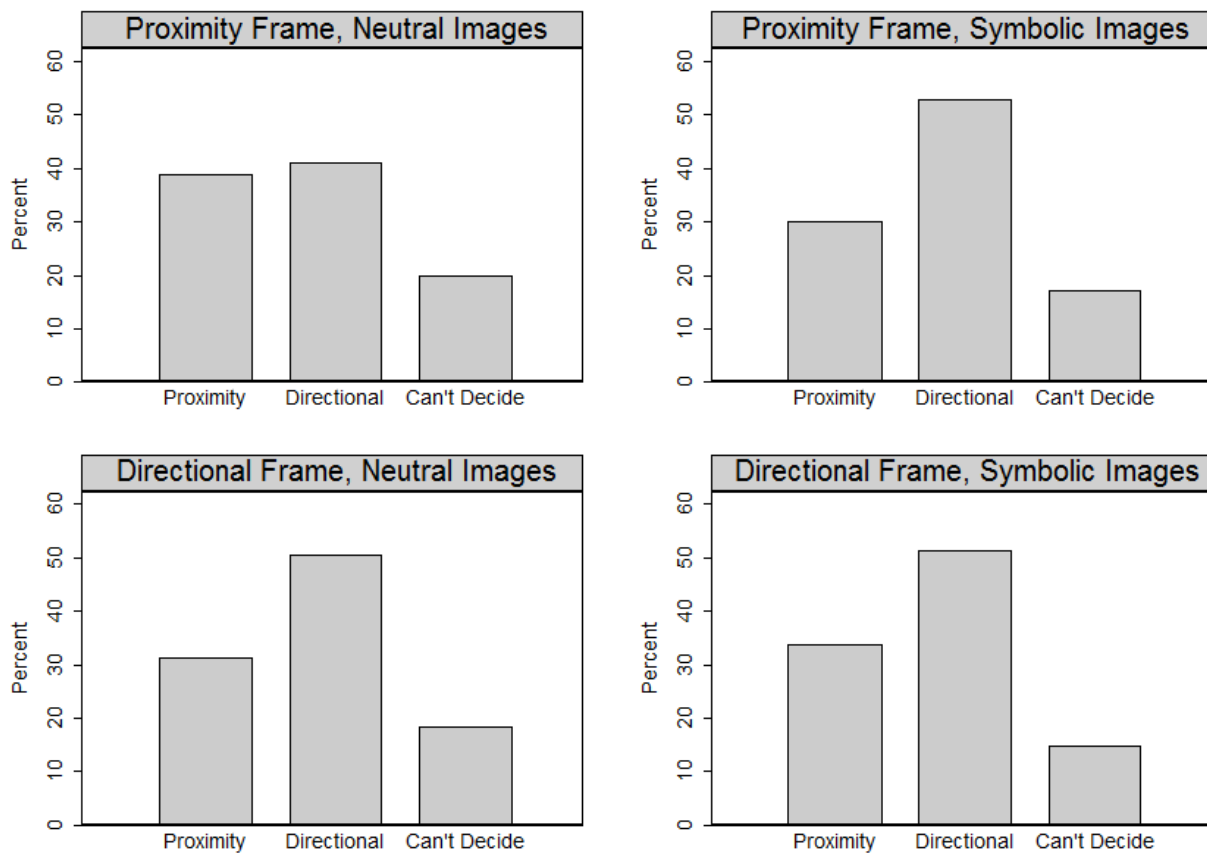
presented here led the participants to behave markedly different from the participants in previous published studies that used experiments.

Moreover, the information in Figure 4-2 suggests that imagery and framing may affect voters' behavior in complex, interactive ways. The directional candidate's advantage was clearly higher under the directional frame than the proximity frame, yet having viewed the symbolic images was only associated with a noticeable increase in directional voting for those who also received the proximity frame. When the candidates' positions were expressed in relative terms, directional voting had an advantage of roughly 20 percentage

points, regardless of the symbolic content in the images. In other words, the impact of symbolic imagery may have been conditioned by the type of frame employed.

We can also take a cursory first look at the impact of framing and imagery on vote choice by examining the percentage of respondents in each treatment group who said they would vote for each of the two candidates, which is displayed as a series of histograms in Figure 4-3. Again, a plurality of respondents in every treatment group expressed a preference for the directional candidate despite the fact that he was obviously less proximate to them. And as with the previous chart, Figure 4-3 seems to indicate some sort

Figure 4-3. Histograms of Votes for Fictional Proximity and Directional Candidates, Compared Across Treatment Groups

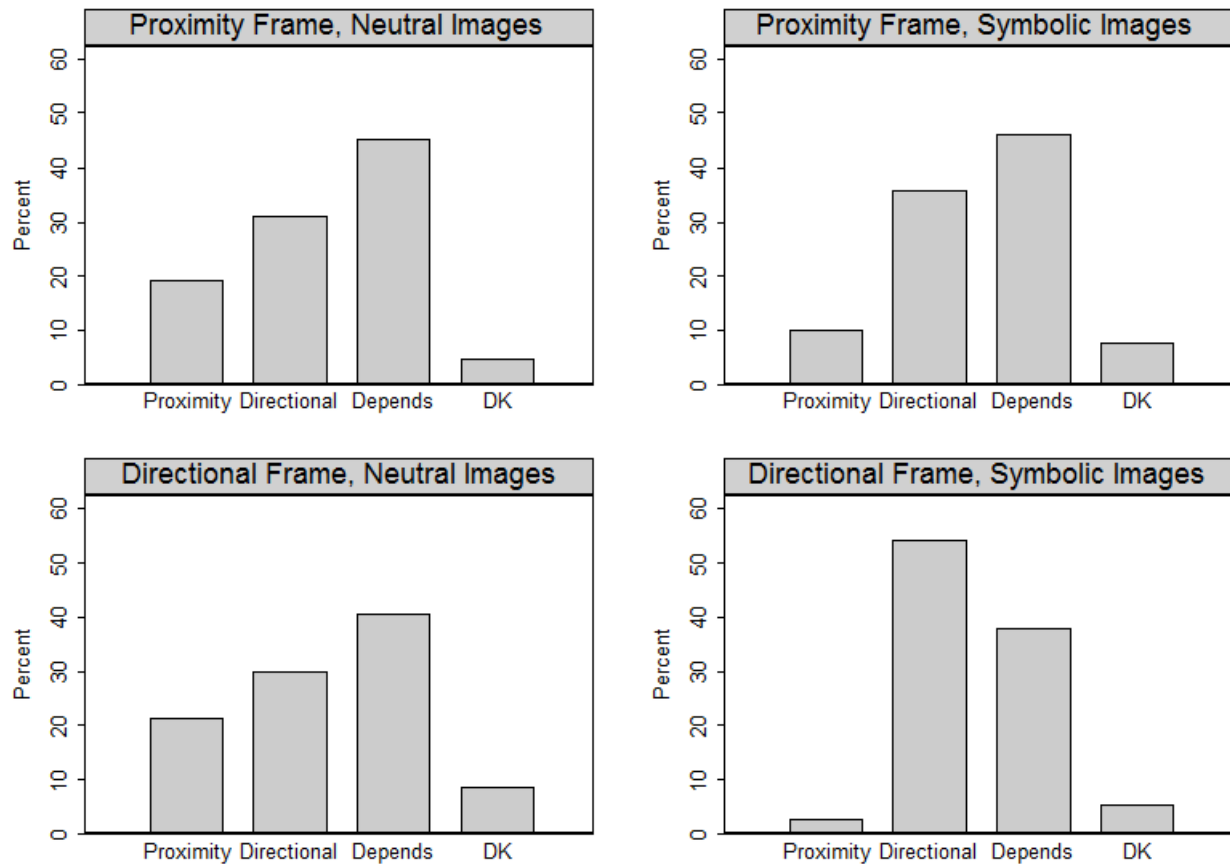


of interactive effect. In all three treatment groups where respondents received the directional frame and/or the symbolic images, the proportion of votes was nearly identical – with roughly 30% choosing the proximity candidate, 50% choosing the directional candidate, and the rest saying they could not decide. Yet respondents who received *both* the neutral images *and* proximity frame split almost evenly between the two candidates.

To bolster the assumption that these differences were related to actual changes in the salience of directional and proximity voting considerations and not merely an accident of the artificial situation I purposely contrived, I also directly asked a subset of the respondents (N=154) to choose whether a description of directional or proximity voting better matches the way they usually think about issues, or whether it depends on the context.¹⁵ Their responses – broken down by treatment group – are displayed as a series of histograms in Figure 4-4, and the general picture is comparable to what we saw in Figures 4-2 and 4-3. Tellingly, the modal response overall was “it depends on the context,” which adds to the body of evidence supporting my conditional model, although this is admittedly a fairly small and imperfectly representative sub-sample of respondents. Even so, once again a greater proportion of respondents in every treatment group identified themselves as directional voters than proximity voters, and the largest difference between treatment groups seems to occur through a combination of images and frame. Those who received the

¹⁵ Specifically, the question asked, “Generally speaking, which of the following options best describes the way you USUALLY evaluate candidates in an election on the basis of their ISSUE POSITIONS?” The proximity option stated, “I have specific ideas about the policies I would like to see, and prefer candidates who support those same ideas.” The directional option stated, “I have general ideas about which side of the issues I am on, and prefer candidates who take strong positions on the same side as me.” The conditional option stated, “It depends on the context. Sometimes (A) better describes me. Other times, (B) better describes me.” A fourth opt-out option stated, “I do not think much about candidates’ issue positions, OR none of the above describes the way I think about issues.”

Figure 4-4. Histograms of Responses to Question Asking Which Type of Voting Best Describes the Way Respondents Use Issues, Compared Across Treatment Groups



proximity frame and/or neutral images all responded in roughly comparable proportions.

Yet respondents who received *both* the directional frame *and* symbolic images favored directional voting over proximity voting by about 50 percentage points (up substantially from about 10 or 20 in the other three groups), and self-identified directional voters even surpassed those who claimed “it depends.” Meanwhile, only a few respondents self-identified as proximity voters under these treatment conditions – just a small fraction of the number who did so in every other treatment group. In short, this question corroborates the findings of the OLS models with a different measure of directional voting, and adds two

new pieces of evidence in favor of the conditional hypothesis: the plurality of voters who viewed descriptions of both proximity and directional voting and indicated that they do both depending on the context, and the fact that self-identified proximity voters dwindled to almost zero while a majority identified as directional voters when both the frame and imagery favored directional considerations.

On the whole, these inter-group summaries provide only a cursory first look at issue voting, images, and framing, yet at least three general trends seem to be apparent. First, whether measured using thermometer differences, vote choice, or self-identification, these results provide far more support for the directional theory than previous experimental studies. Second, from a first glance it appears that framing and imagery might matter, in precisely the directions predicted by my conditional model of issue voting. Although a deeper analysis is required to see if these effects stand up to rigorous scrutiny, we can still observe what appear to be nontrivial increases in the prevalence of directional considerations when respondents received the directional frame and/or images with strong symbolic content. And third, it appears that framing and imagery in communication might interact with one another such that the major differences are found when *both* factors work together to encourage the same type of voting. These last two observations will be explicitly tested in the following section.

Results of Statistical Analyses

Recall from chapter 3 that directional and proximity voting can be differentiated on the basis of either candidate evaluation – the degree to which a voter likes or dislikes a particular candidates – or vote choice – the voter’s expressed preference for one candidate

or the other. In chapter 3 I could only look at candidate evaluations, but because the experimental design allows for the creation of fictional candidates with precise combinations of issue positions not always available in the real world, this chapter encompasses both types of dependent variables. I will consider each of these in turn.

Candidate Evaluation

Table 4-1 contains the results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis in which each respondent is an observation and the dependent variable is the difference between the respondent's feeling thermometer scores for the two candidates, with the proximity candidate's score subtracted from the directional candidate's score. A higher value of the DV would therefore correspond to a stronger preference for the directional candidate. The independent variables include dummies indicating whether the respondent received the symbolic images and whether the respondent received the directional frame, as well as the respondent's average feeling thermometer score for the four images.¹⁶ I include an interaction term between the image thermometers and the symbolic images dummy to separate out the effects of strong emotional reactions to the strong symbolic content images, rather than conflating them with whatever reactions respondents had to the neutral images. I have called this interaction term "Symbolic Attachments" because it indicates the degree to which the images stirred up positive or negative affect toward

¹⁶ Because its relationship with the dependent variables ran in the opposite direction as the rest of the high symbolic content images, the thermometer ratings of the picture of the hard-working were first re-coded so that lower scores indicated more positive reactions and higher scores indicated more negative reactions. One might suspect that respondents associated the image of a farmer toiling away with the idea that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps instead of getting handouts from the government.

Table 4-1. Effects of Framing and Symbolic Attachments in OLS Regression Analyses of Candidate Evaluation from Survey Experiment

<i>DV: Thermometer Score Differential (Dir. Candidate – Prox. Candidate)</i>	
Variables	Parameter Estimates
Directional Frame	9.41 (4.31) **
Symbolic Images	-1.02 (4.53)
Image Thermometers	-.20 (.22)
Symbolic Attachments [†]	.82 (.28) **
Symb. Images X Frame	-3.18 (6.09)
Party ID	-3.20 (4.28) **
<i>Controls:</i>	
Female	.08 (3.06)
Black	6.30 (5.59)
Hispanic	7.73 (6.82)
Asian	-5.81 (5.98)
Responsibility for Thinking	-11.39 (6.60)
Prefer Complex Problems	5.38 (3.50)
N	530
R-squared	.267
** Statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, two-tailed. Standard errors in parentheses.	
† Interaction between Symbolic Images and Image Thermometers	

visual symbols related to welfare spending.¹⁷ This interaction is wholly compatible with the directional theory, which argues that in order to break down the issue voting process:

“... we must know how intense the individual and the candidate are with regard to the issue. How much emotion is associated with it for the individual, and how much does the candidate stir feelings on the issue? The magnitude of the impact of the issue is determined by an interaction of these two intensity levels.” (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989, 96).

¹⁷ Since it is a multiplicative term with the Symbolic Images dummy variable, respondents who received the weak symbolic content images would all have a score of zero on the interaction variable, indicating that any emotions stirred by the neutral images should be wholly unrelated to the issue of welfare spending.

The results of the OLS regression are largely consistent with my conditional model's predictions. The directional frame variable is large and significant in the expected direction, which suggests that voters even more strongly preferred the directional candidate – despite his distance from them – when they were told the candidates were on different sides of the status quo. This is especially noteworthy because the absolute location of the neutral point in the experiment was determined solely by the respondent's position – the “status quo” was completely artificial and had no prior significance whatsoever to the respondents until they were asked to suppose that it existed. Thus, while the arbitrary nature of the neutral point is sometimes raised as an objection to the directional theory of issue voting (Lacy and Paolino 1999), the results here suggest that even the one-time suggestion of a *purely* arbitrary neutral point can lead individuals to vote directionally. Once the cue was made apparent to them, even an imaginary neutral point – of which respondents had no prior knowledge and with which they had no prior experience – was still powerful enough to substantially alter their feelings toward a pair of candidates where one was obviously more proximate to the respondent than the other.

Moreover, whereas the dummy variable for symbolic images is not significant here, we do see a significant increase in support for the directional candidate for those with higher values on the Symbolic Attachments variable – that is, those who had the strongest affective responses to the symbolic imagery. This is consistent with the theoretical view of issue voting processes as being conditioned on the prevalence of symbolic thinking, but reveals an additional wrinkle – the effectiveness of symbolic imagery depends on individual-level characteristics of the person who views it. The symbolic images did not affect every respondent to the same degree, and did not influence candidate evaluation

unless the respondent actually had a strong emotional reaction to them, which not all of them had. However, those respondents for whom the images *did* stir an intense affective response expressed a significantly greater preference for the directional candidate.

Finally, despite the indications from the histograms shown earlier, there was no significant evidence of an interactive effect between framing and imagery from the OLS analysis.¹⁸ However, as I will show next, such evidence *is* apparent when looking at respondents' actual vote choice.

Vote Choice

Table 4-2 contains the results of a logistic regression with the vote choice question as the dependent variable. Respondents were coded as "1" on the DV if they indicated they would vote for the directional candidate, and coded as "0" otherwise.¹⁹ The independent variables here are the same as in the OLS regression analysis, with the key addition of an interaction term between symbolic attachments and the directional frame²⁰. Because the symbolic attachments variable was itself a first order interaction, that makes this new term

¹⁸ The inclusion of a three-way interaction term between symbolic images, image thermometers, and directional frame (along with the additional constituent two-way interactions) does not affect this conclusion. The coefficient on the three-way interaction in such an alternative model is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

¹⁹ Those who said they absolutely could not decide between the candidates were included in the group coded as "0." Binary logistic regression was chosen because a multinomial logit analysis suggested that the difference between supporting the directional candidate and supporting the proximity candidate could be attributed to roughly the same independent variables as the difference between supporting the directional candidate and answering "I absolutely can't decide." The same general conclusions I report here are similarly supported using a binary logit with "Can't decide" excluded, a multinomial logit, or an ordered logit with "Can't decide" as the middle category. The three-way interaction term is significant in all of these alternative specifications, although the significance level of some variables changes modestly, due in large part to smaller sample sizes within subgroups.

²⁰ Again, the inclusion of this term in the OLS model of candidate evaluation does not affect the results of that analysis. See Footnote 18.

Table 4-2. Effects of Framing and Symbolic Attachments in a Logistic Regression of Vote Choice from Survey Experiment

<i>DV: Vote Choice (1 = Vote for Dir. Candidate)</i>	
Variables	Parameter Estimates
Directional Frame	.66 (.32) **
Symbolic Images	.65 (.30) **
Image Thermometers	.00 (.02)
Symbolic Attachments [†]	-.03 (.02)
Attachments X Frame ^{††}	.08 (.04) **
Image Therms X Frame	-.01 (.03)
Symb. Images X Frame	-.79 (.42)
Party ID	-.40 (.05) **
<i>Controls:</i>	
Female	.10 (.20)
Black	.38 (.36)
Hispanic	-.29 (.43)
Asian	.05 (.38)
Responsibility for Thinking	-.45 (.43)
Prefer Complex Problems	.58 (.23) **
N	530
Pseudo R-squared	.145
** Statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, two-tailed test. Standard errors in parentheses.	
† Interaction term between Symbolic Images and Thermometers	
†† Three-way interaction between Symbolic Images, Image Thermometers, and Frame	

a three-way interaction, which also necessitates the inclusion of the various constituent two-way interaction terms.

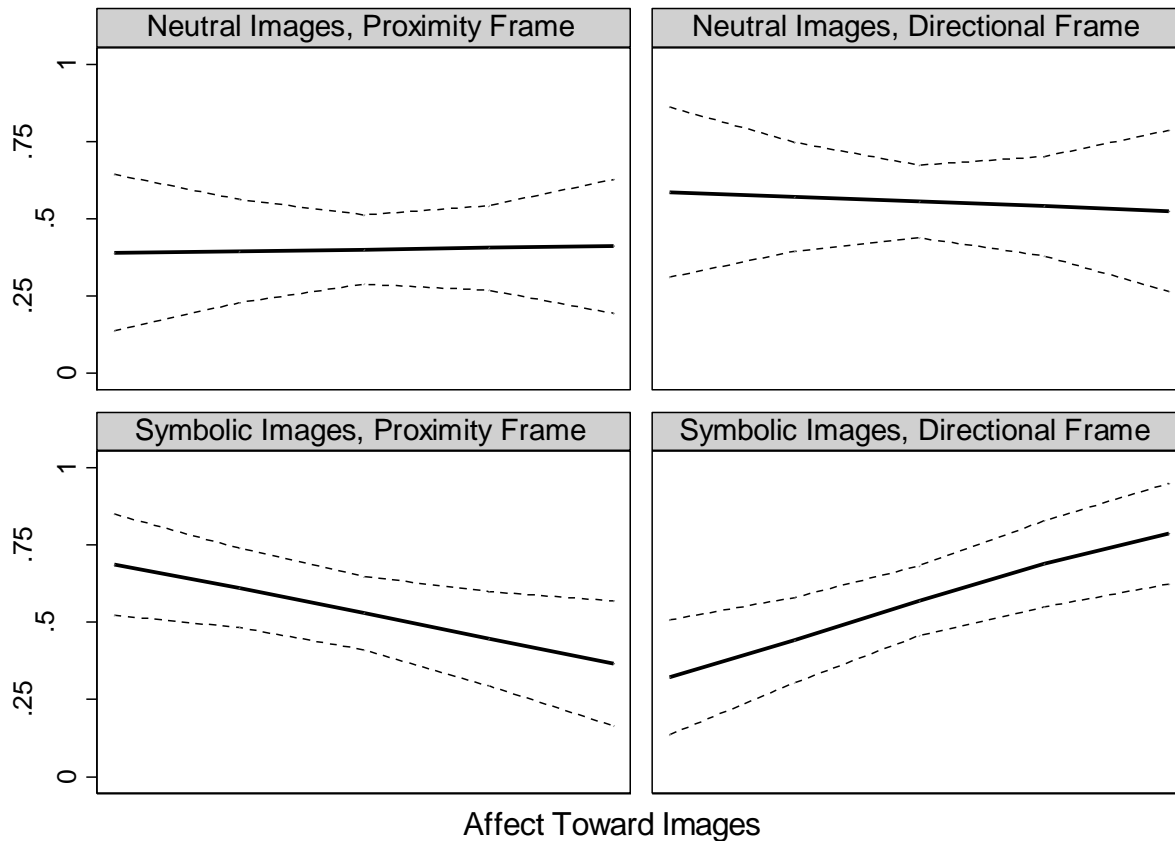
In the vote choice model, consistent with both of my hypotheses, the dummy variables for directional frame and symbolic images are positive and significant – viewing images with strong symbolic content and having the candidates’ issue positions framed in relative terms were each associated with a statistically significant increase in voting for the directional candidate.

The three-way interaction term between symbolic attachments and the directional frame is also significant, and associated with an even stronger preference for the directional candidate. Again, we see that the effectiveness of imagery and framing is conditioned by individual-level characteristics of the person receiving the message. Those respondents for whom the symbolic images stirred an intense affective response were affected even more by the directional frame, in precisely the direction predicted by my hypotheses.

Because a second order interaction is difficult to interpret, Figure 4-5 illustrates the effects visually with a series of connected line plots showing the predicted probability of voting for the directional candidate for voters in each treatment groups, across the range of values on the symbolic attachments variable. The profile is for a political independent with all other control variables held at their modal values. The dashed lines show 95% confidence bands.

In three of the four treatment groups – namely, when the frame and/or imagery favor proximity considerations – the confidence bands do not exclude the possibility of a horizontal line, meaning we cannot rule out powerful responses to the images having a null effect. However, when the images had strong symbolic content and were combined with a directional frame, the responses had a substantial and significant relationship with their vote choice. Under these conditions, the participants with the strongest attachments were, on average, almost 50 percentage points more likely to vote for the hypothetical directional candidate than voters at the lowest end.

Figure 4-5. Effect of Emotional Response Toward Images on Predicted Probability of Voting for Directional Candidate, by Treatment Group



Discussion

Although some nuance is required in the interpretation, the results provide strong evidence in favor of my conditional model of issue voting. Across every treatment group, a majority of respondents said they preferred the candidate who wanted to spend the most on helping the poor, even though the candidate was clearly less proximate to them. When the candidates' issue positions were described relative to an artificial status quo position, with the directional candidate on the same side of the neutral point as the respondent and

the proximity candidate on the opposite side, the respondents' preference for the directional candidate was even more pronounced. And, this effect was especially strong for those who had the strongest emotional reactions to images that were high in symbolic content. It has been shown that selectively framing otherwise equivalent information about candidates' issue positions either in absolute or relative terms *can* systematically influence the frequency of proximity and directional voting, at least for some subset of voters.

Taken as a whole, the results of this new experiment make at least two substantial contributions to the academic literature on political behavior. First, they provide what may be the strongest experimental evidence to date that clearly favors directional voting. And second, they indicate that the process of issue voting is not as straightforward and unchanging as scholars have so far assumed. The traditional idea of voters always using issues the same way, regardless of context and external factors, must be thoroughly re-examined. Instead, scholars of issue voting should begin to take into consideration the degree of symbolic and technical thinking brought to bear by each voter, as determined by both individual characteristics and the way information about the candidates has been communicated to them.

It would be understandable to view these findings cynically, as a sign of a badly flawed political system where voters can be swayed one way or the other by crafty politicians and campaign strategists. Regardless of whether this is normatively desirable, the following excerpt from Zaller (1992) seems appropriate:

"Framing and symbol manipulation by elites are sometimes discussed in conspiratorial tones, as if, in a healthy democratic polity, they would not occur. But from my perspective they are, whether healthy or not, unavoidable. For, given a public that has no fixed attitude toward what it wants done, but simply a range of

only partially consistent considerations, someone has got to play the role of crystallizing issues in a way that can lead to action” (95).

By extension, if voters have no fixed criteria for translating a candidate’s positions into an actionable evaluation, someone has got to translate issues for them in a way that permits meaningful political participation. And if the results of this experiment are a good indication, someone – in particular, strategic elites – can.

CHAPTER 5

ISSUE-BY-ISSUE VOTING

Chapter 2 suggested three potential pillars of the conditional model of issue voting: voters, issues, and communication. So far, I have empirically tested two of these pillars and found that characteristics of both the message (Chapter 4) and the voter (Chapter 3) seem to matter when it comes to determining the way citizens use issues to evaluate candidates. But, what about characteristics of the issues themselves – are entire policy areas naturally more conducive to directional or proximity voting?

The answer to this question has practical implications for both scholars of political behavior and for candidates themselves. From a candidate's point of view, if the issue matters then the optimal positioning strategy might differ markedly from one policy area to the next, such that the platform that maximizes one's vote share could be a mix of both moderate and extreme positions in a specific pattern determined on an issue-by-issue basis. If, on the other hand, the issue itself does *not* help determine whether a position will be judged directionally or proximally, then candidates might have more freedom to take sincere issue stances and then frame them strategically in order to encourage whichever type of voting would be more advantageous. From the academic standpoint, if the issue matters then attempts to test between the directional and proximity theories – especially

those which do so by looking only at a single issue (e.g. Tomz and Van Houweling 2008 or chapter 4 of this dissertation) – could be highly sensitive to researchers’ decisions about which specific issue(s) to include in the study. It would be problematic, then, insofar as these sorts of decisions are often justified only briefly and nonchalantly in published works, if at all.

As with differences across voters and frames, the vast majority of work on voting behavior implicitly assumes that individual issues are largely interchangeable, or at least that their differences are not *systematically* related to a particular voting model. To date, this assumption has not been explicitly tested, despite speculation that issue effects could exist. For instance, in their critique of the directional-proximity literature, Lewis and King (1999) alluded to the possibility of different voting criteria for different issue “dimensions”:

The debate in the literature is focused on whether it is the proximity or directional model that best explains voter behavior. However, implicit in this debate is the simultaneously determined question of what dimension (or dimensions) people use to decide. This makes the question of proximity vs. directional *conditional* on what dimension is being used by voters or analyzed by researchers, since it could be the case that people follow the proximity model on some dimensions and the directional model on others. (23-24)

Claassen (2009) also considered the same possibility and found that abortion seemed to be a directional issue while military spending was a proximity issue, but my aim here is to explain precisely what it is about certain issues that lends itself more easily to one particular type of issue voting than the other.

Whereas Chapter 3 tested the supposition that individual vote proximately or directionally on different dimensions according to the strength of their symbolic attachments, this chapter asks whether individual dimensions are themselves generalizable as proximity or directional in nature. The idea that issue-level characteristics

can affect the public's attitudes and behavior is hardly new, and a review of the literature in light of the findings of Chapters 2 and 3 suggests good reasons to suspect that some issues might be more directional than others.

Effects of Issue-Level Traits on Political Behavior

Because the research on political issues is so vast, it is important here to distinguish precisely what I mean by “issue-level” effects or characteristics from the more general meaning of “issue effects” in common scholarly parlance. What I am interested in here are the *inherent* traits of a particular political question or policy area, which are distinguishable at least in principle from the positions people take on the issue or the importance they attach to it, or the other ways they might respond. Therefore, whereas studies about the consequences of factors like issue attitudes (e.g. Goren 1997; Jackson 1975), issue polarization (Abramowitz 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Baldassari and Bearman 2007; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Poole and Rosenthal 1984), or issue salience (Belanger and Meguid 2008; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Epstein and Segal 2000; Krosnick 1990; RePass 1971) address “issue effects” in the broadest sense of the term, these are manifestations of different ways people use, react to, or think about issues rather than traits of the issue, *per se*.

Among the prominent work that might be understood as looking at effects of inherent issue-level traits is Stokes' (1963) dichotomous categorization of “position-” and “valence-issues.” According to this approach, called position-issues – which include things like abortion, school prayer, and privatization – are more conducive to strategic position-taking on a left-right dimension because they involve choosing from a set of potential

government actions. Other issues – called valence-issues – instead involve linking one party or the other to some universally desirable trait, such as better economic conditions or lower crime (see also: Butler and Stokes 1969; Green 2007; Stokes 1992).

Because it offers a straightforward classification scheme for different types of issues, it may seem enticing to use this approach to test for the effects of issue-level traits on the two models of issue voting. However, such an attempt may be unmanageable for both practical and theoretical reasons. The theoretical difficulty is that Stokes' (1963) own explanation implies that whether something is a valence-issue or a position-issue is not determined by intrinsic qualities of the issue itself but is, once again, solely a product of the way people use and react to the issue. Using economic prosperity – a quintessential valence-issue – as an example, he argues that in the unlikely event that some part of the population were to desire economic distress, the issue would automatically be considered a position-issue. “That it is *not* such an issue,” Stokes argues, “is due solely to the fact that there is overwhelming consensus as to the goal of government action” (374). This dichotomy, then, is yet another manifestation of differences in the aggregate use of or response to an issue, rather than inherent traits of the issue itself.

This fact also creates the practical difficulty that although people have a variety of divergent ideal points on position-issues, on valence-issues every actor – including both voters and candidates – essentially shares the same ideal point (Enelow and Hinich 1982). Thus, we would observe little to no meaningful variability in issue positions, the distances between them, or their scalar products. With no variance in the predictors of interest, any test of directional versus proximity voting for valence-issues would be moot.

The best framework for testing issue-level effects on spatial voting models, then, seems to be Carmines and Stimson's (1980) theory of “easy” and “hard” issues. The use of easy issues, they say, depends less on a voter's level of information or sophistication because the issue itself is inherently less difficult than hard issues. By contrast, hard issues exert a disproportionately strong influence on the political behaviors of the well-informed rather than the ill-informed. And yet, unlike position- and valence-issues, the distinct ways voters use easy and hard issues are *consequences*, not the defining features, of the two types of issues. Carmines and Stimson argue that easy and hard issues sharply differ in kind: easy issues are symbolic rather than technical, deal with policy ends rather than means, and have been on the political agenda for a long period of time. Hard issues, of course, exhibit the exact opposite of these features. The theoretical claim here is that the inherent content, nature, and/or age of the issue itself either complicates or simplifies the spatial mapping process required for issue voting.

The easy versus hard distinction has been shown to influence “vertical constraint” (Pollock et al 1993)– that is, the degree to which abstract orientations such as ideology and values shape more specific attitudes (Feldman 1983; Steenbergen and Brewer 2004; see also Alvarez and Brehm 1997; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). This is because easy issues are understood to have obvious connections to deeply held symbolic beliefs, whereas hard issues are more challenging to link unless enterprising elites go out of their way to explain and emphasize those connections (Pollock, Lillie, and Villes 1993). The types of orientations that contribute to vertical constraint also include affective attachments toward social groups (Steenbergen and Brewer 2004, 118), which happen to be precisely the sort of symbolic

considerations I found in chapter 3 to affect directional and proximity voting. Thus, there is a compelling theoretical reason to anticipate a conditional relationship between easy-hard issue classification and the two major spatial models of issue voting.

Conditional Issue Voting with Easy and Hard Issues

Again, according to my conditional model of issue voting, symbolic considerations lead to directional voting, and technical considerations lead to proximity voting. Combining this with the conceptualization of easy issues as more symbolic than technical, and more closely linked to symbolic attachments, produces a straightforward expectation: *easy* issues should be more conducive to *directional* voting, and *hard* issues should be more conducive to *proximity* voting.

The expected causal mechanism can be explained formally as follows. In chapter 4, I offered this as the typical utility function of a conditional issue voter:

$$Evaluation = [\beta_0^p - \beta_1^p(A - X)^2] * w_1 + [\beta_0^d - \beta_1^d((A - N)(X - N))] * w_2 \quad (1)$$

Like strategic framing by elites, the salience content of issues themselves could help determine the salience weights (w_1 and w_2) on the directional and proximity components of this equation. Whereas I suggested that framing raised or lowered these weights by causing individuals to think about a particular consideration shortly before they were asked to

make judgments, issue content could produce different expected weights from one issue to the next by shaping the distribution of applicable considerations.²¹

For instance, suppose that a typical voter is making a judgment on the basis of a hard issue. Because the issue is said to be technical by nature and difficult to connect with gut-level attachments, one would expect that most of the relevant considerations he or she possesses would be technical rather than symbolic. If top-of-the-mind sampling involves pulling considerations from one's head in a way that mimics pulling marbles out of a bucket, and the marbles are all labelled as either “technical” or “symbolic” this would imply that the bucket is filled with mostly “technical” marbles – and therefore when choosing a marble somewhat randomly from the top of the bucket, the probability of it being a technical one exceeds the probability of it being a “symbolic” one.

In the same way, if a voter is making a judgment on the basis of an easy issue, a larger proportion of the considerations should be rife with symbolic content that is easily linked to the question at hand. The bucket should contain more symbolic marbles, and therefore the probability of randomly grasping a symbolic one off the top may exceed the probability of grasping a technical one. Once a few marbles – or rather, considerations – have been selected, the overall net difference between the technical and symbolic content

21 In the Receive-Accept-Sample model of opinion and decision-making, the “applicability” of a consideration refers to its relevance or appropriateness to the question at hand (see Chong and Druckman 2007; Olmastroni 2014; Strack, Martin, and Schwarz 1988). In making a judgment, individuals sample from only those considerations they deem applicable, rather than from the complete set of both relevant and irrelevant considerations they might be carrying at a given time. Thus, symbolic considerations should only influence their attitudes toward a particular candidate's issue position if they find reason to link the two together. That linkage – one manifestation of vertical constraint – should be stronger and simpler for easy issues than for hard issues.

in the complete sample would determine whether the voter's final assessment of the candidate's issue position better resembles proximity or directional voting.

In short, the easiness of an issue could partly determine the balance of applicable symbolic and technical considerations voters may call upon, which in turn – as demonstrated in the previous two chapters – produce decisions based on either issue distance or direction and intensity. Specifically, my theory begets the testable hypothesis that voters will be more likely to engage in *proximity* voting on *hard* issues (when they use them at all), and *directional* voting on *easy* issues.

Research Design

With some modification, the mixed model approach I employed in chapter 3 can be similarly leveraged to test for differences in issue voting processes across different subsets of policy areas. Recall that the equation,

$$Euclidean\ Dist.^2 = |A|^2 + |X|^2 - 2|A| |X| \cos AX \quad (2)$$

is a formula for squared Euclidean distance, which is the quantity of interest in proximity voting. *Ceteris paribus*, a voter's assessment of a candidate should become more negative as distance in issue space increases. However, as Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) showed, this equation can also be partitioned into a “length” component, equal to $|A|^2 + |X|^2$ and a “scalar product” component, equal to $2|A| |X| \cos AX$. The latter of these, quantities, the scalar product, is the quantity of interest in directional voting. *Ceteris paribus*, a voter's

assessment of a candidate should become more positive as the scalar product between their positions increases.

After the length and scalar product terms are calculated for each respondent in a data set and a given candidate, they can be included as independent variables in an OLS regression predicting affect toward the candidate. If the unstandardized partial regression coefficients on the length and scalar product terms are each significant and equal to one another, the equation simplifies to a single coefficient on the squared Euclidean distance formula, thereby indicating proximity voting. If only the coefficient scalar product term is significant but the length coefficient is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, then the length term drops out of the model equation, which then simplifies to a single coefficient on the scalar product, thereby indicating directional voting. (See Chapter 3 for more discussion)

When I tested for the effects of voters' idiosyncratic symbolic attachments and aversions, I included separate length and scalar product terms for issues where each voter had especially strong emotional reactions to relevant target groups and symbols. In this case, however, I am interested in the effects of *issue*-level characteristics rather than *voter*-level characteristics. Therefore, here I need to partition the issues in a way that does not vary across respondents but remains fixed for all possible voters; since my theory posits a particular effect for easy and hard issues, the easy-hard dichotomy provides the basis for such a separation. Specifically, the regression equation I estimate is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Eval = & b_0 + b_1 length_{EASY} + b_2 scalar_{EASY} + b_3 length_{HARD} \\
 & + b_4 scalar_{HARD} + controls + error
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{3}$$

This differs from my earlier analysis based on individual affect toward target groups in that here I am predicting general patterns in the way most or all voters will respond to particular issues. In Chapter 3 I defined “strong symbolic attachments” as those ranking at or above the 75th percentile in the extremity of their affect (whether positive or negative) toward groups associated with each issue; attachments were weak or strong *relative to those of a given proportion of voters on the same issue*. Thus, in a sense I negated any variation in the way people *collectively* responded to different issues – whether a given issue was associated with lots of extreme symbolic affect or very little, I still identified roughly 25 percent of respondents who had stronger attachments than the rest. In this analysis, however, I am testing whether those differences across issues are meaningful to spatial voting models. Though, to reiterate, I am focusing not on differences in affect per se, but on the inherent issue-level traits that might produce them.

The data for this analysis come from the 2008 and 2012 National Election Studies²². These two particular years are advantageous for three reasons. First, they were the two most recent presidential elections at the time this chapter was authored. Second, the issues covered by the self-placement and candidate-placement questions on the NES surveys were quite consistent from one election to the next, enabling a more reliable analysis of the same set of issues rather than having to use different questions in different years. And third, one candidate – Barack Obama – ran in both election years, thereby holding a number of candidate-level conditions constant and ruling out a number of alternative explanations for

²² The 2004 election was not included because using the same classification scheme and list of issues as the other two election years would have produced only one issue with an “easy” label and would therefore be highly sensitive to both measurement error (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008) and idiosyncratic characteristics of the issue or question itself.

any observed effects. Specifically, the issues I include are aid to blacks, defense spending, government spending, guaranteed jobs, and health insurance.

Identifying Easy and Hard Issues

The next step in estimating the regression model specified in Equation 2 requires distinguishing which of the five issues in the study are “easy” and which are “hard.”

Following Carmines and Stimson (1980), I accomplished this via the following approach.

Recall that the defining characteristic of an “easy” issue is that even poorly-informed voters can use it, whereas for “hard” issues the relationship between issue preferences and vote choice is conditioned by voter information. So, first I categorized all survey respondents into three groups – low, medium, and high information – using the NES interviewer’s personal assessment of the respondent’s level of political knowledge. Zaller (1986, 17-18) has justified the discriminatory utility of these interviewer rating knowledge items, arguing that the interviewer assessments are “very powerful” and “highly effective as measures of political information.”

Next, for each issue in each year, I conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the relationship between respondents’ positions and their vote choice, and compared the eta-squared statistic – a nonlinear measure of the variance in vote choice that is attributable to issue positions – for each of the three information groups. If an issue is *hard*, we should see the eta-squared statistic increase monotonically as political knowledge grows, such that voters’ positions on the issue explain more variation in vote choice among the well-informed than among the averagely-informed, and in turn more among the averagely-informed than among the ill-informed. The ability to use the issue and map positions

appropriately should depend on the level of knowledge wielded by the voter. On the other hand, if an issue is *easy*, the relationship between eta-squared and information should be either flat or fluctuate non-monotonically. The ability to use the issue should not be conditional on high levels of knowledge.

The results from this process are displayed in Table 5-1, along with the easy-hard categorization of each issue according to the criterion of increasing monotonicity. The table also bolsters the credibility of this coding scheme if we look only at the eta-squared values for the lowest information category. The purpose behind Carmines and Stimson's easy and hard issue dichotomy was to differentiate issues that uninformed voters *could* use from issues they *could* not use; here we can see that within each year, the issues coded as "easy" have the highest eta-squared values for uninformed voters, while the issues coded as "hard" have the lowest. In other words, according to this metric, the issues I call "easy" were actually the easiest issues for the least knowledgeable respondents to use, and the issues I call "hard" were actually the hardest for them to use. Thus, the labels seem to be consistent with the empirical and theoretical definitions of easy and hard issues, as described by the creators of those terms.

One surprising thing stands out in Table 5-1, however, which is worth noting here and which I will revisit shortly. Between two consecutive presidential election cycles, the type assigned to three out of the five issues actually *flips* – leaving us with an almost entirely different set of issues in each category from one election year to the next. This is quite contrary to what we should expect if the distinction between an easy and a hard issue is an innate difference in kind, as Carmines and Stimson imply. It is unlikely that the intrinsic nature of several different issues would change so dramatically in just four years.

Table 5-1. Determination of Easy-Hard Issue Categorization

<i>Eta-squared</i>				
Issues	Low Info	Average Info	High Info	Issue Type
2008				
Aid to blacks	.17	.18	.18	Easy
Defense spending	.11	.10	.19	Easy
Government spending	.07	.11	.31	Hard
Guaranteed jobs	.20	.16	.24	Easy
Health Insurance	.04	.12	.29	Hard
2012				
Aid to blacks	.14	.18	.25	Hard
Defense spending	.15	.04	.15	Easy
Government spending	.19	.19	.37	Easy
Guaranteed jobs	.07	.25	.28	Hard
Health Insurance	.08	.19	.34	Hard
<i>Eta-squared statistic indicates strength of nonlinear relationship between issue position and vote choice</i>				

Moreover, although their theory offers a plausible explanation for why an issue might become easier over time – easy issues have been “long on the political agenda” (Carmines and Stimson 1980, p. 80), so voters may have an easier time using an issue as they gain more experience and familiarity with it – it is not clear what could make an issue suddenly shift from easy to hard, as we can observe for both aid to blacks and guaranteed jobs between these two years. It is hard to think of any game-changing event(s) during this time period that could have suddenly robbed both issues of their inherent symbolic content or altered them in any other fundamental way. This, therefore, is the first clue that these traits may not actually be as fixed and inherent to the issues as once believed. I will return to this idea in my discussion of the model results.

Results

Again, my theory suggests that voters should use directional voting for easy issues and proximity voting (if anything at all) for hard issues. With the mixed model analysis I have employed here, we would find evidence for directional voting if the coefficients on the scalar product terms are significant, the coefficients on the length terms are not significant, and/or the scalar product coefficient is significantly larger than the length coefficient. This is what I expect to observe for easy issues. Conversely, we would find evidence for proximity voting if the coefficients on *both* the scalar product and length terms are significant, and if they are *not* significantly unequal in size. So, this is what I expect to observe for hard issues.

The actual results of the analyses are displayed in Table 5-2. Just as in Chapter 3, to check for robustness I estimated each model once by measuring the candidates' positions using the individual perceptions of each survey respondent, and again using the mean perception across all respondents. This allows me to check whether the observed effects are sensitive to the same model specification decisions that caused much of the controversy in the directional versus proximity literature.

The table also includes the results from a series of one-tailed Wald Tests that check whether each scalar product coefficient is significantly larger than the corresponding length coefficient. "Yes" indicates that the difference *was* significant and in the correct direction to favor directional voting. "No" indicates that the scalar product coefficient was *not* significantly larger than the length coefficient, thereby favoring proximity voting.

Table 5-2. Spatial Voting Effects for Easy and Hard Issues in a Mixed Model Analysis of Candidate Evaluation

<i>Mean placement of Candidate Position</i>					<i>Individual placement of Candidate Position</i>				
Candidate models	Parameter Estimates	Sig. Level	Wald Test*		Candidate models	Parameter Estimates	Sig. Level	Wald Test*	
Obama 2008					Obama 2008				
<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	2.94 (.69)	.00	Yes		<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	1.27 (.26)	.00	Yes	
<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.59 (.55)	.28			<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.33 (.32)	.29		
<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	1.43 (.44)	.00	No		<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	.65 (.25)	.01	No	
<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.65 (.48)	.17			<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.39 (.29)	.17		
<i>R²</i>	.578				<i>R²</i>	.661			
McCain 2008					McCain 2008				
<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	1.24 (.46)	.01	Yes		<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	.63 (.25)	.01	No	
<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.10 (.48)	.82			<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.31 (.33)	.33		
<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	-.26 (.49)	.59	No		<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	.60 (.22)	.01	No	
<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	1.18 (.41)	.00			<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.67 (.33)	.04		
<i>R²</i>	.314				<i>R²</i>	.422			
Obama 2012					Obama 2012				
<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	1.47 (.59)	.01	No		<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	1.00 (.27)	.00	Yes	
<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.24 (.47)	.61			<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.29 (.25)	.26		
<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	.97 (.45)	.03	No		<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	1.01 (.25)	.00	No	
<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.41 (.44)	.35			<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.52 (.24)	.03		
<i>R²</i>	.627				<i>R²</i>	.683			
Romney 2012					Romney 2012				
<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	.99 (.51)	.05	Yes		<i>Scalar_{EASY}</i>	1.04 (.23)	.00	Yes	
<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	-.05 (.44)	.90			<i>Length_{EASY}</i>	.42 (.29)	.15		
<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	.25 (.33)	.45	No		<i>Scalar_{HARD}</i>	.57 (.22)	.01	No	
<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	-.40 (.40)	.33			<i>Length_{HARD}</i>	.22 (.28)	.43		
<i>R²</i>	.540				<i>R²</i>	.611			
<p>* Test indicates whether scalar product coefficient is significantly greater than length coefficient, $p > .05$. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses. Significance level is $P > t$. Note: Control variables are omitted from the table but were included in the analysis.</p>									

Looking first at the coefficients for easy issues, the evidence clearly points to directional voting in every case. *Every* scalar product coefficient is statistically significant at the .05 level, *no* length coefficient is significant, and a majority of the Wald Tests indicate that the difference between the two coefficients is also statistically significant. For hard issues, the proximity model's showing improves. The length coefficient is significant in three of the models, and *none* of the Wald Tests indicate a significant difference between the length and scalar product coefficients.

Table 5-3 uses the results from the same models, but organizes the information separately for easy issues and hard issues, and condenses the results using the Model Ratio. This number is calculated simply using the coefficient estimates already found in Table 5-2, and refers to how many times larger the scalar product coefficient is relative to the corresponding length coefficient. In other words, using my regression equation,

$$Eval = b_0 + b_1 length_{EASY} + b_2 scalar_{EASY} + b_3 length_{HARD} + b_4 scalar_{HARD} + controls + error$$

the Model Ratio would be equal to $(\frac{b_2}{b_1})$ for easy issues and $(\frac{b_4}{b_3})$ for hard issues. As explained in chapter 3 and Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989), a Model Ratio very close to 1 indicates stronger evidence for proximity voting, while a Model Ratio much larger than 1 indicates stronger evidence for directional voting. Thus, it can be thought of as a continuous measure of the "directionality" or "proximityness" of voting behavior with respect to each category of issues and each candidate. The Wald Test column of the table again indicates whether the scalar product coefficient is significantly larger than the length coefficient; a significant

Table 5-3. Logit Model Results, Organized by Issue Type

“Easy” Issues				“Hard” Issues			
Specification	Candidate Models	Model Ratio*	Wald Test Unequal?	Specification	Candidate Models	Model Ratio*	Wald Test Unequal?
Mean Placement	Obama 2008	4.98	Yes	Mean Placement	Obama 2008	2.18	No
Mean Placement	McCain 2008	12.4	Yes	Mean Placement	McCain 2008	Undef	No
Mean Placement	Obama 2012	6.08	No	Mean Placement	Obama 2012	2.40	No
Mean Placement	Romney 2012	Undef	Yes	Mean Placement	Romney 2012	Undef	No
Individual Placement	Obama 2008	3.85	Yes	Individual Placement	Obama 2008	1.67	No
Individual Placement	McCain 2008	2.03	No	Individual Placement	McCain 2008	.90	No
Individual Placement	Obama 2012	3.51	Yes	Individual Placement	Obama 2012	1.96	No
Individual Placement	Romney 2012	2.51	Yes	Individual Placement	Romney 2012	2.57	No
“Easy” Issue Summary		5.05	75% Yes	“Hard” Issue Summary		1.95	100% No
* Scalar product coefficient divided by length coefficient; values much greater than 1 favor directional voting.							

result favors directional voting. And finally, the Summary row near the bottom of the table displays the average Model Ratio across all models – including both mean and individual placement – for easy and hard issues, as well as the percentage of significant Wald Tests for each issue category.

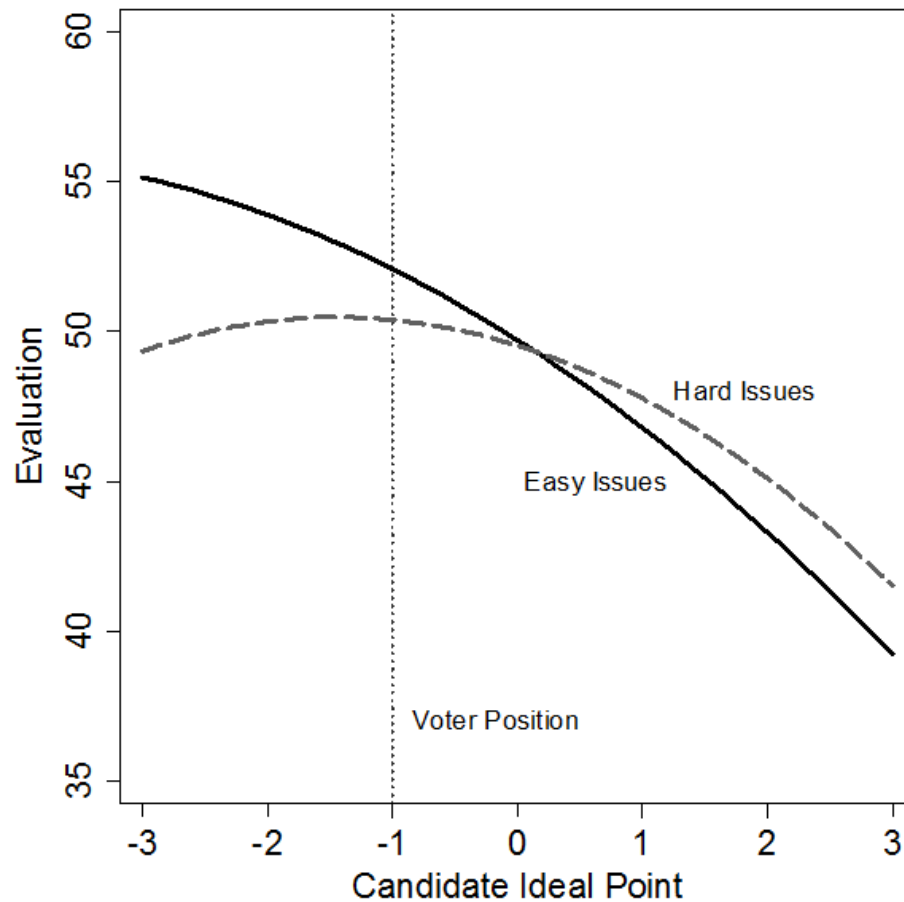
Glancing across the Summary row provides a quick and easy picture of how well my hypotheses holds up to the tests here. For easy issues, the mean Model Ratio is greater than 5, and three-fourths of the Wald Tests indicated a significant difference between the scalar product coefficient and the length coefficient. This evidence points strongly to directional voting, as predicted. For hard issues, the mean Model Ratio is less than 2, and *none* of the Wald Tests are significant. This evidence points primarily to proximity voting, as

predicted.²³ The results suggest that, generally speaking, easy issues are directional issues and hard issues are closer to proximity issues.

Figure 5-1 illustrates this conditional effect visually for a voter who is located at point -1, evaluating hypothetical candidates with a full range of possible ideal points. The graph displays two different utility curves, which were both produced by plugging the *average* length and scalar product coefficient estimates (across *all* candidates and candidate-placement specifications) into the model equation. The solid line, representing voting on easy issues, is very closely linear and decreases monotonically from left to right as candidates' ideal points move from the voter's side of the issue to the opposite side. This shape is consistent with the theoretical support curve for directional voting. The dashed line, representing voting on hard issues, resembles an inverted parabola and decreases nearly symmetrically as candidates move away from the voter's position, in either direction. This shape is consistent with the theoretical support curve for proximity voting. On hard technical issues, the voter punishes candidate for taking extreme positions, even those on his own side of the issue. But on easy symbolic issues, the voter rewards candidates for taking strong positions on his own side, even those that are more extreme than his own ideal point.

²³ Three of the Model Ratios are listed as "undefined" (McCain 2008 for hard issues, and Romney 2012 for both easy and hard issues, all under mean-placement only) because one of the coefficient estimates in each of these cases was negative; these were excluded when calculating the mean in the Summary row. However, this should not bias the results too badly because none of these three cases clearly disconfirmed my hypotheses – the coefficients for each candidate strongly point to directional voting for easy issues, and either proximity voting or no effect for hard issues, as predicted. In fact, an alternative summary Model Ratios for easy and hard issues calculated by dividing the average scalar product coefficient across all models (including the three excluded here) by the average length coefficient across all models produces a remarkably similar number for each type of issue.

Figure 5-1. Predicted Utility Curves for a Hypothetical Voter, Easy and Hard Issues



Discussion

This chapter set out to investigate whether inherent traits of issues themselves make citizens more likely to engage in directional or proximity voting when they evaluate candidates on the basis of a particular policy position. The easy-hard issue typology provided an ideal basis for such tests because it is predicated on theoretical underpinnings that correspond closely to my conditional model of issue voting. Specifically, technical and symbolic content are among the factors that determine an issue's easy-hard categorization, and also (as demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4) affect the type of issue voting an individual

will employ at a given moment. The results presented here by and large confirm the predicted connection between issue type and spatial voting models, but with one glaringly unexpected observation: several issues fell into one category in 2008, and then the opposite category in 2012. There is no clear theoretical basis for this phenomenon in Carmines and Stimson's original explication of the "two faces of issue voting," but this dissertation's theoretical argument can speak to how this might have happened, and what implications might stem from it.

One tempting potential conclusion might be that easy-hard categorization really is an inherent and permanent trait, but that the approach of calculating eta-squared statistics for different strata of informed and uninformed voters is a flawed measurement strategy. However, the evidence here seems to indicate this is improbable. When easy and hard issues were identified using this method, they still seemed to correspond with issue voting processes that I have shown to be associated with symbolic and technical thinking, respectively – precisely the type of cognitive processes Carmines and Stimson described for each issue type in their dichotomy. If the eta-squared approach is measuring something other than issue difficulty, then whatever it does tap still seems to correspond remarkably well to what they argue easy and hard issues are all about. Thus, if there is some inherent issue-level trait related to difficulty, it must be very different – both operationally and theoretically – from anything scholars have described to date.

The more likely possibility suggests a refinement of the theory of easy and hard issues – that these categories, too, may be dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed characteristics of different policy questions. The difficulty of an issue may be a product of changing circumstantial factors such as (but not necessarily limited to) strategic

framing by elites, which we saw in chapter 4 can induce directional or proximity voting for certain voters. If that is true, it stands to reason that factors which increase the likelihood of directional voting might also make an issue “easier” for ill-informed voters, while factors that increase the likelihood of proximity voting might make an issue “harder” for them.

This is perfectly consistent with the traditional conception of directional voting as being simpler than proximity voting. Proximity voting requires the cognitively difficult tasks of thinking about an issue as an ordered dimension of policy alternatives, placing a candidate’s precise position on this dimension, and calculating distances to various candidates. Directional voting, on the other hand, is emotional, symbolic, and gut-level. If a voter sees an issue directionally (which, as I showed in chapter 3, is more common if they possess some relevant symbolic attachments or aversions), then information (or the lack thereof) need not structure or inhibit their ability to use it. Of course, more direct testing is necessary before we can say definitively which contextual factors determine issue difficulty. However, these results should at least provide the impetus for future researchers to look more closely at how issue difficulty can change from one election to the next.

As for my main research question here, the fact that issues changes in difficulty unpredictably in just four years means there is little evidence for the proposition that certain issues are inherently more conducive to proximity or directional voting. The easy-hard typology was probably the most attractive means for testing the impact of issue-level characteristics, and although the spatial voting processes did correspond to issue difficulty as predicted, the results nevertheless indicated that difficulty is not as permanent as previously believed. Thus, although directional and proximity voting seem to be conditioned by individual-level symbolic attachments and by strategic communication by

political elites, I find no evidence in this particular case of lasting differences between specific issues. So far as can be ascertained here, we cannot firmly conclude that any given issue (at least among those included in this study) is flatly prevented by its inherent content from being framed or interpreted directionally and, in turn, from being “easy” for uninformed voters. It does seem likely that some obscure or severely technical issues could defy such processes, but since such issues would rarely if ever be included on a major political opinion survey, it would elude detection here and in most studies. An unavoidable limitation of this study is that we can only draw conclusions about the specific issues in this dataset. The possibility will always exist that other issues might behave differently; for now, this will be left for future research to investigate.

The results of this chapter confirm the power of symbolic attachments and strategic communication by elites in the conditional model of issue voting. Even an issue that appears hard and favors proximity voting in one election can – under the right circumstances – become easy and favor directional voting the next time around. Scholars of political behavior should consider that issue difficulty, like the spatial models themselves, may be conditional. And in fact, they may be conditional upon the very same factors.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This dissertation proposed a new conditional model of issue voting to describe and predict the way voters evaluate electoral candidates on the basis of their policy positions. Until now, those who used spatial models to study issue voting almost always treated the process as completely fixed. Either everyone was a proximity voter all the time, or everyone was a directional voter all the time, or – even in the most flexible models – individuals could fall at some idiosyncratic but unchanging spot in between directional and proximity, all the time. Scholars defended rival models that each held some water theoretically, but largely treated them as mutually exclusive propositions. As a result, the scientific community was critically split over how to explain one of the most basic, fundamental features of our democratic system: the electoral connection between mass attitudes and elite behavior.

The major scholarly contribution of this dissertation is to demonstrate that these models do not just compete for prominence in the academic literature – even more importantly, they also compete for prominence *within the hearts and minds of individual voters*. Classic proximity voting is a rationally reasoned political behavior stemming from emotionless technical considerations; directional voting is a viscerally emotional behavior

rooted in symbolic attachments and aversions. At least in principle, anyone can be a directional or proximity voter on a specific issue, and the factors that determine which behavior will win the internal battle include the strength of one's attachments to political symbols that are relevant to the issue at hand, as well as the way elites have framed and presented information about the issue to the voter. The effects of individual attachments and strategic framing are substantial enough that no consistent evidence could be found indicating that a given issue would behave the same way from one election to the next, even where the same candidate participated in both contests just four years removed. And, the evidence was strongly robust to the modeling decisions that had hindered voting behavior scholars to date – the conditional model held up consistently under both mean placement and individual placement of candidates' positions, for both candidate ratings and vote choice, and both with real-world survey data and under experimental conditions.

This final chapter discusses the practical and theoretical implications of the dissertation's findings, clarifies their place in the academic literature, and identifies their limitations. Finally, it concludes by suggesting potential lines of future research.

Implications

The discovery that issue voting processes are conditional could seem esoteric at first glance, in the sense that perhaps only those closely acquainted with the proximity versus directional debate would care about or apply these findings. And indeed, the fact that both models make identical predictions over a considerable range of possible voter-candidate combinations admittedly means that in a number of cases, little or nothing would change if the conditional model were taken into account. Nevertheless, all things

considered, the consequences are quite powerful. This study has vital implications for a wide variety of audiences – including scholarly implications for political scientists, strategic implications for candidates and parties, and normative implications for democracy itself. I shall explore each of these categories in turn.

Scholarly Implications

First, most narrowly, scholars of issue voting would be well-advised to take symbolic attachments and elite communication into account when modeling mass decision making. This dissertation adds to the body of evidence levied against the pure form of the classic proximity model, a paradigm so ubiquitous in the literature that many scholars seem to take it for granted as *the* model of issue voting. But at the same time, it does not declare a total victory for the directional theory or warrant a full-scale purge of proximity models from behavioral research. Instead, it carves out a prominent and well-defined place for each of the rival theories to work side-by-side, arbitrated by the sampling of symbolic and technical considerations. Citizens will generally engage in directional voting when they possess strong symbolic attachments and when policy questions are framed in relative terms. Conversely, they will engage in proximity voting when they lack strong symbolic attachments and when policy questions are framed in absolute terms. Incorporating this dynamic into models of choice and candidate valuation will bolster their predictive and explanatory power.

Second, the conditional model can neatly explain a multitude of unsolved empirical puzzles and apparently conflicting evidence found thus far:

- *Why are the utility curves we calculate based on observed preferences neither as symmetric as the proximity theory predicts nor as monotonic as the directional theory predicts?* Conditional issue voting implies – and assumes – a heterogeneous electorate, as well as potential heterogeneity amongst the ways each particular voter might use different issues. Any predicted utility curve that aggregates across all voters, issues, and contexts will therefore combine both directional and proximity voting. However, as demonstrated in figures 3-2 and 5-1, once we explicitly incorporate the determinants of heterogeneity into our models, the predicted utility curves actually correspond very closely to those theorized by the directional and proximity theories (see figure 2-4).
- *Why do candidates and parties converge less than predicted by the proximity theory, yet more than predicted by the directional theory?* This is a logical consequence of a heterogeneous and conditionally manipulable electorate of issue voters. Candidates need not converge to the median voter if they are on the same side of the issue as a majority of them, and if they can connect the issue to voters' symbolic attachments and frame it in relative terms in order to induce directional voting.

Yet on the other hand, they cannot diverge indefinitely outside of the mainstream, because on any given issue, a sizable portion of the voters will lack strong symbolic attachments and vote for the most proximate candidate, thereby punishing divergence. Although it may seem intuitive to predict that voters lacking an affective connection to a particular policy would simply ignore the issue

altogether, I found that in most cases, issues *do* still have a significant effect in the absence of symbolic attachments, and that effect is primarily based on proximity.

Candidates and parties must strategically balance the advantages of catering to proximity voters against those of catering to directional voters, and that makes it optimal for them to take positions somewhere in between the median and the periphery. In fact, that's commonly what we observe – but whereas it presents something of an anomaly for either of the pure traditional models, realistic candidate positioning comports easily with the predictions of the conditional model of issue voting.

- *What can we make of the controversial “region of acceptability” in the directional theory?* Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) introduce this concept of an unspecified boundary in the issue space, separating positions voters deem reasonable from those they deem unreasonable. The directional theory accounts for the lack of extreme divergence by positing that any candidate taking a position beyond this boundary will begin to lose support due to their extremism. In the absence of this notion, the directional utility function would have no clearly defined maximum and no equilibrium strategy. Yet despite its theoretical necessity, the region of acceptability has been attacked as “underdeveloped, ad hoc, and [having] some very implausible empirical implications” (Iversen 1994, 48; see also Granberg and Gilljam 1997; Merrill 1993; Westholm 1997).

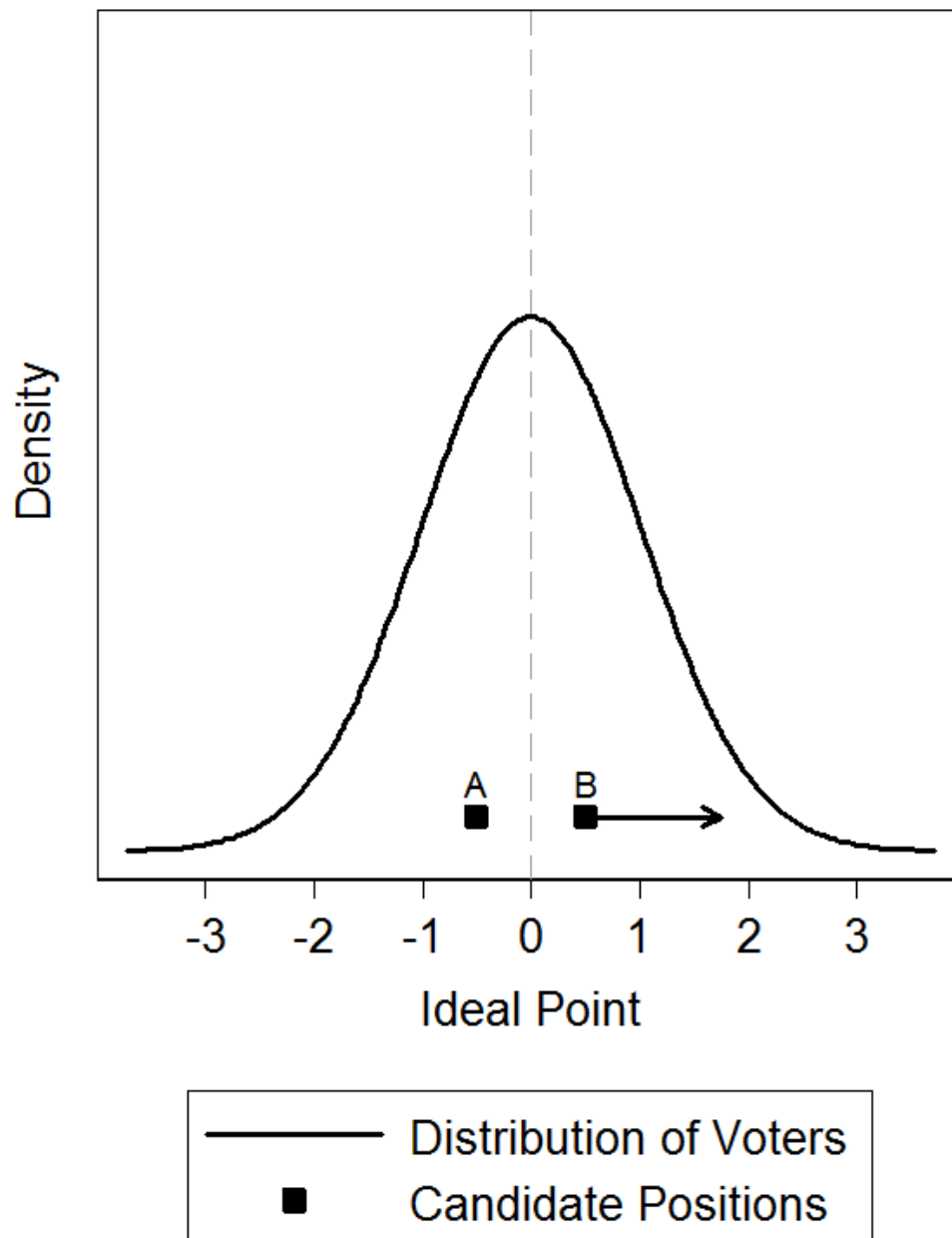
Under the conditional model, however, the need for this additional parameter disappears, as a similar extremism punishment follows organically from

heterogeneity. Consider, for example, a hypothetical issue on which the voters' ideal points are distributed normally, as in Figure 6-1. The graph also depicts two candidates, labelled "A" and "B," who begin with fairly moderate positions equidistant from the neutral position, zero. In this scenario, the candidates would split the vote evenly.

Now suppose that Candidate B begins to change position on this issue by moving rightward (ie. conservative) along the issue dimension, as depicted by the horizontal arrow. The candidate's support will decrease among voters to the left of the neutral point because he or she will be both increasingly distant from proximity voters and more intense on the opposite side of the issue from liberal directional voters. However, all of those voters would have preferred Candidate A on directional and/or proximity considerations to begin with. Candidate B is not "losing" those voters since they would not have given their support anyway.

On the conservative side of the neutral point, however, the relative proportion of directional and proximity voters determines how far rightward Candidate B can slide before incurring a net disadvantage. A more conservative position will increase the intensity of support from conservative directional voters, but at some point the candidate will reach a threshold where virtually all of those voters already give their full and enthusiastic support, and there will be little more to gain from further extremism. The proximity voters, meanwhile, will punish the candidate for every step taken away from their own respective ideal points. And, since the distribution of voters peaks in the center of this particular issue, as the

Figure 6-1. Hypothetical Illustration of Candidate Positioning with Normally Distributed Electorate



candidate moves toward more conservative positions he or she is likely to lose more support from proximity voters than is gained. In fact, many moderate conservative proximity voters will soon find themselves closer in proximity to Candidate A, thereby

flipping their preferred vote choice. The further to the right Candidate B moves, the more of these voters will be left behind.

We can see that Candidate B's optimal positioning strategy will depend in large part upon how many directional and proximity voters are on the conservative side of this issue – which determines at which point the added punishment from proximity voters as a result of the candidate's extremism begins to outweigh the added support from directional voters. That point can be thought of as the boundary of what Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) called the “region of acceptability,” except that unlike the directional theory, the conditional model of issue voting generates a testable prediction as to its location, so long as we can collect some very basic facts about the distribution of voters in the electorate.

But, chapter 4's findings add one more wrinkle: the candidates do not have to take the “region of acceptability” as a given and simply react accordingly. They can also attempt to *influence* the location of the boundary by framing the issue in a way that will increase or decrease the rate of proximity voting. A candidate who desires (whether strategically or sincerely) to take a more extreme position could communicate about the issue in relative terms – explicitly framing it in terms of two opposing policy directions – and thereby increase the electorate's aggregate tolerance for extremism. On the other hand, a candidate who desires to take a more moderate position could communicate about the issue in absolute terms and thereby increase the electorate's reliance on proximity-based considerations. The interaction between strategic manipulations by various elites would – probably

along with other factors – define where the boundary ultimately ends up for the given issue in the given election.

The crucial point here is that under the conditional model of issue voting, the theoretical function of the region of acceptability can be fulfilled *without* necessarily incorporating a mysterious and unspecified free parameter. Instead it is fulfilled and explained by the natural consequences of the theory itself, thereby providing an improvement in terms of both parsimony and falsifiability.

- *Why has the strongest evidence for proximity voting come from experimental studies, whereas the strongest evidence for directional voting has come from real-world surveys?* Most published works that support the proximity theory over directional on the basis of experimental data (e.g. Claassen 2007; Lacy and Paolino 2010; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008) have at least one thing in common: participants either have the candidates placed for them on the issue dimension, or are told precisely what the candidates' stance is, often in absolute and unemotional terms. Yet in actual elections, acquiring this information and placing the candidates accordingly are seen as the most difficult aspects of proximity voting and a major reason critics say the proximity theory is unrealistic (e.g. Rabinowitz 1978; Stokes 1963).

Despite the rigorous and most assuredly sincere efforts of these researchers to create conditions that mirror the real world as much as possible, it is likely that previous experimental designs biased the results toward proximity voting. Chapter 4 of this dissertation demonstrated that the way information about issues is communicated matters, and chapter 5 left the possibility open that *any* major issue

could potentially flip from a proximity issue to a directional one – or vice versa – depending on contextual factors. It is reasonable to assume, then, that experimental stimuli crafted and framed differently could have produced pro-directional results – and indeed, this assumption was confirmed in chapter 4, in which more than 50% of study participants expressed a preference for the obviously *less* proximate candidate. This proportion was even higher – and significantly so, at least for those with strong symbolic attachments – when the candidates’ issue positions were expressed in relative rather than absolute terms.

In short, whether a voter uses proximity or directional considerations to make a political decision depends largely on the conditions present at the time of the decision. To the extent that the conditions established in an experimental design differ from authentic conditions in the political realm, the results of the experiments *should* differ from the results of real-world surveys. More research is probably needed in order to describe precisely what “authentic conditions” look like, but the conditional model of issue voting provides a simple and logical explanation for why the results from these two different types of evidence might appear to contradict one another the way they have so far in the literature.

Strategic Implications

The lessons of the conditional model of issue voting can be useful not only to scholars, but also to elected officials themselves. As actors in the political arena who depend on public support for achieving their own goals (Fried 1997; Herbst 1998), politicians have a lot to gain from better understanding the forces that shape voting

behavior. By strategically applying the principles of this dissertation in their roles as both candidates and policymakers (or advisors thereto), elites can optimize the effectiveness of the tools they have at their disposal in order to accomplish important political objectives.

First, in terms of *campaign rhetoric*, non-centrist candidates would be well-advised to frame their communication about the issue in relative terms and attempt to connect it directly to salient political symbols. If carried out effectively, these efforts could increase the prevalence of directional considerations and bring electoral benefits. Moderate candidates, on the other hand, are better off framing their positions in absolute terms, in the hopes of increasing proximity voting. It is not clear without further research which type of frame would have the advantage if they were pitted against each other by opposing candidates in a competitive environment. However, the results of this dissertation suggest that whichever candidate does win the frame game could earn some essential leverage by favorably shaping the issue voting calculus of the electorate.

Second, in terms of *position taking*, candidates need not always be afraid of taking bold stances on issues – even when those stances are more extreme than most of the electorate. The results presented here demonstrate clearly that greater distance from an individual in issue space does not automatically disqualify a candidate from earning his or her vote – and not merely because non-issue considerations sometimes outweigh the importance of the issue at hand. Under the correct conditions, voters can actually prefer the more extreme candidate. However, elites ought to pay close attention to the extent to which the present conditions favor proximity or directional voting, as these factors will determine the electorate's tolerance for issue extremity. When a critical mass of voters fall on the same side of an issue and possess strong symbolic attachments that can be easily

connected to it, a candidate can get away with more aggressive position taking. When voters lack those symbolic attachments, or fall on the opposite side of the neutral point, moderation may be a more effective position taking strategy.

Third, in terms of *policy making*, understanding conditional issue voting broadens the range of solutions that can plausibly be pursued and also provides tools for narrowing down the list of alternatives. Public opinion matters not only at election time, but also during government sessions when policies are actually debated and passed. Legislators and executives know that they will eventually need to answer for the actions they take in their capacity as public servants. Votes cast, bills sponsored or vetoed, and speeches delivered could all be covered by the media and evaluated by the voters in time for the next election cycle, so elites must constantly look ahead and focus their attention on activities that will maximize their chances of winning re-election (Mayhew 1974).

Although policymaking is similar to position taking in that both involve choices by elites between alternatives aligned on a particular issue dimension, they differ in a few crucial ways. Policymaking produces tangible outcomes and consequences affecting society at large, whereas the mere act of staking out a position, in itself, does not (Highton and Rocca 2005). And, whereas position taking is a largely independent decision that a candidate can see to fruition with little outside help, policymaking is a collective action that often requires compromise (Elving 1996; Enelow and Koehler 1980), bargaining (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1985), logrolling (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Stratmann 1992), and coalition building (Lee 2000; 2003). Thus, elites have less individual control over policymaking than they do over position taking, and must take policy consequences and the preferences of their colleagues into account in addition to

their own and those of their constituents. Policymaking therefore requires elites to consider a broader range of alternatives than position taking, including many options that differ from their constituents' ideal policies.

At the same time, however, the set of policies reasonably available to elected official is necessarily constrained by the opinions of their constituents. If a particular policy solution is likely to face harsh backlash from an electorate because it is incongruent with public preferences, a rational policymaker obviously ought to avoid it to minimize electoral risk. Conversely, if a solution could garner impassioned popular support, a policy maker might pursue that solution in order to maximize electoral success.

But, the evidence for the conditional issue voting model suggests that policymakers sometimes have leeway to pursue or support bold solutions that depart – even widely – from the median ideal point of their constituents. The directional voters on the same side of the issue may reward them for their intensity, and depending on the ratio of voter types on the issue, could outweigh the punishment imposed by proximity voters. If that ratio is unfavorable, they can try to improve it by utilizing the same framing tactics described earlier. It has been suggested that the solutions policymakers pursue are constrained in large part by their abilities to successfully define the issue to the voters (Cobb and Coughlin 1998; Edelman 1993; Jacoby 2000; Rochefort and Cobb 1995). The experiment in chapter 4 demonstrated a new way those abilities can be manifest, thereby expanding the number and types of solutions which can plausibly be pursued.

Elected officials are not as narrowly restricted as classic voting models implied – to an extent, they are free to vote sophisticatedly, wheel and deal, and pursue the goal of enacting good public policy without necessarily jeopardizing the goal of winning re-

election (see Fenno 1977; 1978). Granted, these abilities depend on certain conditions being met, but the evidence implies that those conditions are at least much broader than a firm requirement that “good” policies align perfectly with the voters’ specific preferences, as traditional proximity models implied.

Normative Implications

By focusing on the opportunity for compromise and good policy, the preceding subsection painted a fairly rosy picture of democratic governance in the presence of conditional issue voting. And indeed, many of the normative implications of conditional issue voting are quite positive.

Sweeping social change – even when it is needed desperately – can be slowed to a near halt by timid incrementalism if elected officials fear the electoral repercussions of bold and radical policy visions. Conditional issue voting permits courageous leadership to the extent that directional voters reward strong positions more than proximity voters punish them under a given set of circumstances, and to the extent that elites can use strategic framing rhetoric to alter those circumstances in favor of directional voting.

At the same time, however, a well-functioning democracy depends on voters to provide a disincentive for elites to enact dangerously radical policies. Conditional issue voting provides that disincentive because past a certain point of extremism, policymakers will have nothing further to gain from directional voters, but will continue to lose more and more proximity voters, while increasing the negative affect they receive from voters who oppose them. Moreover, they must at least take positions on the same side of the neutral point as a substantial portion of the voters – otherwise they will lose more votes, from both

directional and proximity processes, than they win. The conditional model therefore has normative consequences somewhat approaching the best of both worlds – flexibility for elites, but not unrestrained freedom.

And finally, negotiation and deliberative consensus-building – processes that are valuable to democracy and collective decision making – can only occur if the participants have the flexibility to seriously consider a variety of different options. Conditional issue voting permits that flexibility because elites have the choice of targeting proximity voters for support by taking centrist positions, targeting directional voters for support by taking stronger positions, and/or manipulating the ratio of directional to proximity voting as needed to gather support for the position they wish to take.

Nevertheless, in truth the advantages granted to elites by conditional issue voting can cut both ways for democracy. The ability of elected officials to pursue policies that differ markedly from the typical positions of their constituents could very easily be a recipe for a deleterious lack of representativeness. On the other hand, it may simply indicate the need to re-interpret representativeness itself. If citizens actually *prefer* (at least some of the time) elites who take positions stronger than their own, and take willful action to elect them, it weakens the a priori assumption that true representativeness has to mean elites' positions coming as close as possible to those of the voters.

Even so, the fact that these preferences may change from one context to the next – that the same voter might base his choices on proximity considerations on one issue or during one election cycle and then use directional considerations for another issue or during a different campaign – certainly complicates the process of objectively assessing just how well a government represents its population. Which actions the masses want elites to

take is not, it seems, such a straightforward question. It depends on the configuration of each individual voter's symbolic attachments and the way each topic has been packaged and communicated to them. This research therefore adds to the work of scholars who claim that many voters lack firm, crystallized preferences on issues (e.g. Converse 1964; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). But whereas most or all of those studies focused on inconsistency in the voters' ideal points themselves, this dissertation showed that even someone with a clear and fixed *position* on an issue can be inconsistent in the way they translate that position into a *candidate preference*. This is not to say, however, that they choose erratically. On the contrary, issue voters generally seem to follow a predictably vacillating pattern that is consistent with multiple established theories of political behavior. That still makes it troublesome to try and pin down a concept like "the public will," but the conditional voting model at least identifies some observable variables that can help clarify it.

Earlier I suggested that the flexibility afforded by conditional issue voting could hypothetically allow elites to pursue the competing goal of enacting good policy. But in fairness, it could just as easily be exploited to pursue bad policy or serve narrow interests. And in fact, the philosophies on which the American government – with its deliberate reliance on separation of powers and checks and balances – was founded do not instill a great deal of optimism about trusting in the benevolence of elected officials. Consider the words of James Madison in Federalist Paper #51:

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions (Madison 1788).

Here, Madison expresses the founding fathers' reluctance to empower policymakers without sufficient external controls. The realization that neither men nor those who govern them are perfectly moral, he argues, necessitates adequate mechanisms to curb the abandon of those who wield authority. Thus, to the extent that conditional issue voting gives elites more freedom to do as they please, it magnifies the need for formal institutions to rein them in. In the final sentence of the passage quoted above, Madison acknowledges that the electoral connection to popular opinion, by itself, is rarely sufficient to keep government in check. The conditional model exposes additional reasons why this may be the case. Still, the outlook is not as dire as it would be if issue voting were nonexistent or unpredictable altogether. It imposes *some* incentives and disincentives – though not absolute control – on the choices policymakers face.

Among the least desirable consequences of conditional issue voting is the strength it yields to radicals who use emotional and divisive rhetoric to stir support for their agendas. This theory provides a parsimonious explanation for the ability of demagogues to rise to power in an otherwise seemingly reasonable democratic society. The results presented in this dissertation suggest that an “extremist” candidate might hypothetically be able to win a popular mandate to impose his will by relating his proposals to strongly-held symbolic attachments and then explicitly framing the issues in terms of two competing policy directions – an “us versus them” brand of rhetoric. And in fact, when most people imagine the sort of tactics employed by such political leaders as Adolf Hitler, Joseph McCarthy, or Theodore Bilbo, each of whom has a famous reputation for demagoguery (Roberts-Miller 2005), those are precisely the sort of ploys they recall.

Of course, such efforts can only be successful under the right set of circumstances. Since directional voting stems from symbolic attachments and framing effects were found to be ineffective on those who lack them, demagoguery requires that likely voters' affect toward particular political symbols be concentrated heavily in the correct direction, rather than the opposite or simply a neutral one. Only then can the ratio of sympathetic directional voters to proximity voters be forced high enough to create an aggregate preference for a *very* extreme issue position. Hitler, McCarthy, and Bilbo's oratory met vulnerable audiences full of lingering aversions to particular outgroups (Jews, Communists, and blacks, respectively) to be capitalized upon. Thankfully, it is probably quite rare for the conditions to be aligned so perfectly for a would-be agitator. But as these notorious names exemplify, in the few exceptional cases where the right communicator launches the right crusade at the right place and time, the impact of the perfect storm can be notable in its severity – even historic.

One contribution of the conditional model is to demonstrate that demagoguery does not necessarily have to entail distracting voters from policy considerations altogether by inducing them to think about non-issue concerns such as the likeability or personal attractiveness of the speaker. At least some of the time, it could simply mean influencing the type of issue considerations that are brought to mind, therefore leading voters to specifically *prefer* more extreme issue positions.

Limitations

Despite good faith efforts, an obvious limitation of the current study is the impossibility of accounting for all times, issues, and contexts. Even though the non-

experimental data spanned multiple election cycles, they did not include anything prior to the year 2004. Studying a longer span of time would improve the temporal generalizability of the study, but this would come at a cost. It is not uncommon for issue placement items on the ANES surveys²⁴ to be dropped, added, and/or re-phrased such that the more years one wishes to incorporate, the less comparable the data will be over time. In this case, the decision was made to err on the side of using a consistent set of questions, which means we can be less certain that the observed relationships are stable patterns of human behavior as opposed to the product of some short-lived phenomenon over the specific years studied. Be that as it may, there were no – so far as I can tell – major happenings around 2004 or 2008 that would obviously explain a widespread change in patterns of issue voting behavior for two or three consecutive election cycles. Thus, while further studies on earlier elections could demonstrate the robustness of the theory, we have little reason so far to believe the specific time frame covered by this dissertation was especially atypical.

The dissertation is also limited by the specific set of issues that were available to be studied. When attempting to describe issue voting *in general*, it would certainly help to have information about as many different issues as possible. Data availability dictated that only a particular handful of issues could be included, and these issues were not necessarily the most important policy concerns to the voters in these elections. For instance, the ANES did not include seven-point issue placement questions about abortion, foreign policy, LGBT rights, immigration, taxes, or a number of other issues which were salient topics during this time frame. In addition, it is possible that voters might react differently to less salient

²⁴ Most other surveys are not well suited to comparing directional and proximity voting because the ANES is one of the few surveys of American political opinions that asks respondents to place both themselves and each candidate on a dimension representing alternative issue positions.

issues than they do to issues higher on the national agenda – though it seems most likely that they simply do not think about those issues very much at all, and therefore any evidence from survey items about non-prominent issues would consist primarily of random noise. Unfortunately, there is not a whole lot that can be done to remedy this limitation, short of conducting new surveys at great financial cost. For the time being, I must simply accept this as an unavoidable weakness of the research.

Other limitations emanated more from my own research decisions. This dissertation expressly focused only on directional and proximity voting, without considering other alternatives, such as discounting (see Grofman 1985; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008). The discounting model predicts, in brief, that voters prefer candidates whose positions are somewhat more extreme than they are because they realize elected officials have to compromise and rarely get exactly what they want. Voters therefore vote proximately except that they “discount” each candidate’s position by a factor, d , so they can choose someone who will actually produce a policy outcome at the voter’s ideal point instead of something negotiated nearer to the status quo.

In particular, the experimental vote choice evidence in chapter 4 cannot empirically rule out the possibility of discounting, since participants were only asked to choose between a candidate who was closer to their ideal point and a candidate who was farther away. Depending on the value of the discounting factor, this could have influenced the results of the models that used ANES data as well. However, the evidence for directional voting and the conditional model is bolstered by the fact that there is little theoretical reason to believe discounting should be correlated with or mediated in any way by symbolic attachments, as the study consistently found. Discounting is not a gut-level

emotional process. Rather, it is sophisticatedly technical and even more cognitively intensive than pure proximity voting. Voters must still go through all of the mental steps required for proximity voting, plus the additional step of planning strategically about realistically deliverable policy outcomes. Unlike directional voting, there is no clear reason to expect feelings toward social groups to affect discounting. Thus, even if the actual prevalence of directional voters may have been inflated in some cases, the evidence for the conditional hypothesis appears sound.

Future Research

Because of the aforementioned limitations and numerous new testable research questions that follow logically from the conditional model, there is need for more empirical studies to fully understand the nuances of issue voting.

First, although I have demonstrated that strategic framing can change the way voters use issue positions to choose between two candidates, the experiment in chapter 4 only presented one type of frame to the respondents at a time, and focused only on a single issue. A possible extension of this approach could use other issues and utilize an experimental design where *multiple* frames are presented in a competitive environment, the way communication from elites actually occurs in an election. It is not yet clear whether the relative or absolute frame would “win” if respondents were exposed to both.

Second, the idea that emotional considerations create heterogeneity in issue voting processes begs the question of *which* emotions do what. So far I have only treated emotion as unidimensional – as either positive (attachments) or negative (aversions) toward political symbols. However, we know that emotions like anger, anxiety, disgust, pride, and

hope can each have very different impacts on behavior (Marcus et al. 1996; Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Both survey experiments and existing public opinion datasets could be leveraged to parse out the distinct effects of specific emotional responses.

Third, much of the evidence to date suggests that some candidates are judged more on the basis of proximity considerations than others. This dissertation suggests that their framing strategies could possibly be one source of this variation, but provides no direct evidence whatsoever that speaks to this. A possible line of research might test whether various candidate-level characteristics such as campaign rhetoric, personality, incumbency, time in office, and/or other factors influence the way elites' issue positions are evaluated.

Fourth, most issue voting research focuses narrowly on vote *choice* as the phenomenon of interest. However, it may also be that the positions of the viable candidates in an election -- as well as the relative salience of emotional and technical considerations in a voter's mind -- could affect the likelihood of *turning out* to vote in the first place. Frames which promote proximity voting by reducing the emotionality of a voting decision might backfire by decreasing the motivation to cast a vote at all. Such a hypothesis could be tested using original experiments and/or existing survey datasets.

Whatever paths future research takes, it is vital that it accounts for contextual factors when studying voting behavior. This dissertation began by asking whether the classic proximity paradigm could be "simple, obvious, and wrong." After offering a new conditional model of issue voting, it showed that the proximity theory tells some but not all of the story; the same can be said for the directional theory. Only by acknowledging the

coexistence of both voting types and understanding the factors that produce them can
scientists unlock the mysteries of political behavior.

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