

Pockets of Responsibility in the American Electorate: Findings of a Research Program on Attitude Importance

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One view of American citizens suggests that attitudes about government policies play little role in shaping people's political behavior. The article summarizes a program of research suggesting that such a view is incorrect. For each citizen, a few personally important policy attitudes tend to have substantial impact on political thinking and behavior. Attitude importance is defined, and its distribution among citizens is noted. Various effects of attitude importance and the reasons why people come to perceive certain policy attitudes as personally important are then discussed. Finally, implications that the research may have for other political phenomena, such as alienation and the meanings of elections, are identified.

Keywords attitude importance, elections, policy attitudes, public opinion, voting

According to many political theorists, democratic governments maintain stability and legitimacy partly because their citizens elect representatives who implement government policies that they favor (e.g., Pennock, 1979). This is presumed to occur because voters' candidate preferences are determined in part by the match between their attitudes toward government policies (i.e., their policy attitudes) and their perceptions of candidates' attitudes toward those policies. This notion, referred to as policy voting, is consistent with the many social-psychological theories that assert that social attraction is based in part on attitudinal similarity (e.g., Byrne, 1971). It is also consistent with the results of many studies of voting behavior in recent American presidential elections (see Kinder and Sears, 1985).

According to the accumulated body of empirical evidence available in the early 1980s, however, the impact of policy preferences on vote choices seemed to be quite a bit smaller than political theorists would hope for. Instead, citizens' candidate preferences could be predicted much more successfully using their affiliations

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with political parties, their assessments of candidates' personality traits, the emotions candidates evoke from them, and their evaluations of incumbent presidents' performance in office (see Kinder and Sears, 1985). Although some have argued with this general conclusion over the years (e.g., Key, 1966), it seemed to have been generally accepted among political scientists a decade ago that citizens' policy preferences play only a small role in directing the outcomes of elections.

During the past 10 years, we have been conducting a program of research challenging this general conclusion. In short, our argument is that any single policy attitude should only influence a citizen's candidate preference to the extent that the attitude is strong. Therefore, to understand the impact of policy preferences on votes, one must take into account variation across voters in the strength of their policy preferences.

Krosnick and Petty (in press) recently defined strong attitudes as those that possess four key features. First, strong attitudes are tenaciously resistant to change. Second, as a result, they are highly stable over time during the course of daily life. Third, strong attitudes exert powerful influences on information processing and decision making. Finally, strong attitudes are potent determinants of social behaviors.

A great deal of research in social psychology has explored various ways of identifying strong attitudes. In our work, we have explored whether the strength of a political attitude can be gauged by the degree of personal importance that an individual attaches to it. In particular, we have pursued two distinct goals: to understand how attitude importance shapes an individual citizen's decision making and information processing, and to understand how attitude importance motivates significant social behaviors and shapes the operation of political systems. In doing so, we have employed two complementary methodologies: analysis of data from face-to-face and telephone surveys of representative samples of American adults, and controlled laboratory studies, usually conducted with undergraduate subjects.

We begin this article by defining attitude importance, explaining how we operationalize it, and differentiating it from a variety of related constructs. Then we briefly review our initial findings regarding the correlates and effects of importance. Next, we describe our most recent investigations in a bit greater depth. Finally, we outline the implications our work has for understanding elections.

Policy Attitude Importance and the American Citizen

We have defined attitude importance as an individual's subjective perception of the degree of personal importance he or she attaches to a particular attitude (e.g., Krosnick, 1988a). To attach great personal importance to an attitude is to care passionately about it and to be deeply concerned about it.

Attitude importance is consequential precisely because of its status as a subjective perception: Perceiving an attitude to be personally important leads individuals to use it deliberately in processing information and making decisions. The impact of this subjective perception is most likely to be apparent when people are in consequential situations that demand they plan out their courses of thought and action carefully. This could include everything from choosing which presidential candidate to support to choosing a spouse or deciding whether to experiment with smoking cigarettes. In such situations, people are likely to rely on their important attitudes to direct information processing and behavior and to ignore their unimportant attitudes.

This definition suggests that attitude importance is related to, yet distinct from, a number of other attitudinal constructs, such as centrality (Converse, 1964), involvement (Apsler and Sears, 1968), ego involvement (Sherif and Cantril, 1947), ego preoccupation (Abelson, 1988), salience (Lemon, 1968), and personal relevance (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). These constructs are all conceptually similar to attitude importance in that they emphasize the significance of an attitude for an individual's psychological system. Our conceptual definition of attitude importance, however, is critically different from the most common formal definitions of these other constructs in one significant respect. Whereas attitude importance is the subjective state of attaching personal importance to an attitude, these other constructs have almost always been defined in terms of links between the attitude object and the self. In contrast, attitude importance is not defined in terms of links to the self. What distinguishes attitude importance from these other constructs is its emphasis on the subjective sense of significance and caring that is attached to an attitude. As we shall suggest below, links between an attitude and an individual's goals, values, or other aspects of the self may well be causes of attitude importance.

In keeping with this definition emphasizing self-perception, we have measured attitude importance via people's self-reports. In particular, we have relied on three principal sorts of questions: how important a policy issue is to people personally, how deeply they care about it, and how concerned they are about it.¹

Initial Research

Distributions of Attitude Importance in the General Public

We began our research program by examining the amount of importance Americans attach to their attitudes about public policy issues. As expected, we found a great deal of variability among citizens in this regard. As the figures in Table 1 illustrate, only relatively small proportions of citizens indicated extremely high levels of importance for each of a series of policy attitudes in 1968, 1980, and 1984 national surveys. Similarly, small proportions of people placed themselves at the lowest end of the importance continuum, and the bulk of people fell somewhere in between.

A key presumption underlying our work is the notion that attitude importance is a relatively stable attribute. That is, rather than being situation specific and highly flexible, the degree of personal importance that people attach to an attitude is presumably a firmly rooted psychological state that remains at least somewhat constant across situations and over time. To test this assumption, we used 1980 national survey data to assess over-time correlations among importance ratings, corrected for attenuation due to random measurement error (for details about the analytic procedure, see Krosnick, 1986). As shown in Table 2, unstandardized regression coefficients ranged from 0.55 to 1.07 and averaged 0.83. Thus our presumption of consistency seems clearly to be supported.

A second underlying assumption of our approach is the idea that attitude importance is an attribute of particular attitudes, not a general disposition of individuals. That is, each person is likely to consider at least some of his or her attitudes highly important and others less important. There certainly may be variability across people in overall tendencies, such that some people may attach slightly more importance to all their attitudes on average than other people do, but we presume that

Table 1
1968, 1980, and 1984 National Election Studies:
Distribution of Policy Attitude Importance in the American Public

Issue	Low Importance		High Importance		Don't Know ^a	Total
	1	2	3	4		
1968						
Urban unrest (<i>n</i> = 1,345)	17.2%	30.8%	42.0%	8.6%	1.5%	100%
Vietnam (<i>n</i> = 1,348)	14.2%	29.3%	46.3%	8.4%	1.8%	100%
1980						
Unemployment (<i>n</i> = 3,471)	8.8%	24.1%	11.2%	8.5%	47.3%	100%
Defense spending (<i>n</i> = 3,590)	7.4%	33.0%	13.1%	15.8%	30.6%	100%
Government services (<i>n</i> = 3,521)	9.2%	32.9%	14.6%	13.0%	30.3%	100%
Relations with Russia (<i>n</i> = 3,370)	10.8%	32.4%	13.6%	12.7%	30.4%	100%
Abortion (<i>n</i> = 3,453)	16.8%	22.7%	13.7%	21.6%	25.3%	100%
Guaranteed full employment (<i>n</i> = 3,114)	10.9%	35.6%	14.8%	12.2%	26.6%	100%
Aid to minorities (<i>n</i> = 3,184)	14.8%	38.6%	13.0%	12.5%	22.2%	100%
1984						
Government services (<i>n</i> = 2,226)	2.1%	27.9%	32.3%	20.5%	17.2%	100%
Involvement in Central America (<i>n</i> = 2,228)	5.0%	30.7%	25.0%	14.0%	25.3%	100%
Aid to women (<i>n</i> = 2,221)	9.4%	38.8%	23.1%	11.5%	17.3%	100%
Guaranteed full employment (<i>n</i> = 2,217)	4.2%	30.8%	33.1%	17.0%	15.0%	100%
Mean	10.1%	31.4%	22.8%	13.6%	22.4%	

^aMost of the respondents in the "Don't know" category in the 1980 and 1984 surveys were not asked the importance question because they said they did not know where they stood on the issue or they did not know where the federal government stood on the issue.

Table 2
1980 National Election Study: Estimates
of the Stability of Attitude Importance

Issue	Time Period ^{a,b}	
	$t_1 - t_2$	$t_2 - t_3$
Unemployment	0.55	0.88
Defense spending	0.84	1.07
Relations with Russia	0.62	0.95
Government social services	0.87	0.89

^aTime lags: $t_1 - t_2 = 4$ months; $t_2 - t_3 = 3$ months.

^bTable entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.

the same individuals are not occupying the highest importance categories for all the issues in Table 1. In support of this notion, correlations between importance ratings of various attitudes made by the same individuals (corrected for random measurement error and correlated method variance) are typically quite weak. For example, one study found them to range from .04 to .43 (average, .20) in 1980 survey data (see Krosnick, 1986).

Theoretical Consequences of Attitude Importance

Social-psychological theories suggest a number of possible consequences of the variation in policy attitude importance apparent in Table 1. For example, according to balance theory, cognitive imbalance occurs when one dislikes a person who holds an attitude similar to one's own or when one likes a person who holds a contrasting attitude (Heider, 1958). According to cognitive dissonance theory, the intensity of the discomfort that results from such inconsistency presumably increases as the personal importance of the attitude increases (e.g., Festinger, 1957). Therefore, when an important attitude is involved, the consequent noxious state should be quite powerful and should demand swift reparation (see Cacioppo and Petty, 1981). Because this inconsistency can be resolved by adjusting one's sentiment toward the other person, people probably come to like others whose attitudes are similar to their own important attitudes and to dislike others whose attitudes conflict with their own important attitudes. Unimportant attitudes are less likely to serve as a basis for interpersonal sentiment.

This reasoning has clear implications for the political candidate evaluation process: The impact of a policy attitude on a citizen's candidate preference should depend upon the personal importance of the policy attitude to the voter. Important attitudes ought to have powerful impact, whereas unimportant attitudes ought to have little.

There are at least three reasons why important policy attitudes should have more impact than unimportant ones on candidate evaluations. For a citizen to choose between competing presidential candidates on the basis of a policy attitude, two conditions must be fulfilled. First, the attitude must be cognitively accessible when candidates are evaluated; that is, the attitude must come to mind as a basis for choosing between the candidates. Higgins and King (1981) suggested that the chronic accessibility of an attitude is determined by three factors: frequency of activation, distinctiveness, and the extent of links between it and other psychological elements. Because important attitudes are frequently subjects of conscious thought, are typically extreme, and are probably extensively linked to other psychological elements (Judd and Krosnick, 1989; Krosnick et al., 1993), these attitudes are likely to be highly accessible. Important attitudes are therefore more likely to come to mind as a criterion by which to evaluate political candidates.

No matter how accessible a policy attitude is, though, a citizen cannot use it to choose between competing candidates unless he or she is aware of their stands on the issue and perceives them to differ from one another. Voters with important policy attitudes might therefore be expected to seek out and attend closely to candidates' public statements of their attitudes toward the policy to detect differences between them. If public statements do not reveal between-candidate differences, voters for whom a policy attitude is important may be especially likely to infer differences using cues such as party platforms, affiliations with individuals or groups

known to have particular policy attitudes (e.g., endorsements by labor unions), and ideological labels with which candidates are described in the news media (Conover, 1981). Thus even when two candidates appear to take similar stands toward a policy, voters whose attitudes toward it are important seem likely to infer between-candidate differences. As a result, they may find it especially easy to choose between the candidates on that basis.

There is also a third reason why important policy attitudes are likely to be potent determinants of candidate evaluations. When a citizen recognizes that he or she disagrees with a liked candidate on a policy issue or agrees with a disliked candidate, the discomfort due to the apparent cognitive imbalance can be resolved by changing one's own policy attitude. That is, one can change one's policy views to match those of liked candidates or to diverge from those of disliked candidates. This process, a form of persuasion, would be a relatively simple way to preserve one's candidate preferences and to eliminate the existing discomfort.

Whereas this repair strategy is likely to be implemented in the case of unimportant policy attitudes, it is unlikely to occur with important policy attitudes because important attitudes are likely to be highly resistant to change. Extensive linkage to other attitudes, beliefs, values, and other psychological elements through a network of associations in memory probably exerts stabilizing forces (Ostrom and Brock, 1969). Important attitudes are likely to be accompanied by large stores of relevant knowledge in memory, which would equip individuals to counterargue against attitude-challenging information. People tend to be surrounded by friends with whom they agree in terms of attitudes they consider important (e.g., Tedin, 1980), so that these attitudes are reinforced by social support. Also, people are especially likely to commit themselves to their important attitudes in public (Krosnick, 1986; Schuman and Presser, 1981), which increases their resistance to change (Hovland, Campbell, and Brock, 1957). Information that challenges important attitudes is therefore likely to be subjected to biased elaboration that defends the attitudes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), so that they are unlikely to change. For all these reasons, cognitive imbalances are unlikely to be resolved by changing important policy attitudes. Instead, policy attitudes that people consider personally important should have substantial impact on their candidate preferences, and unimportant policy attitudes should have little impact.

Empirical Evidence

Candidate Evaluations. Recent national survey data handsomely validate the hypothesized role of attitude importance in guiding candidate evaluations. The figures in Table 3 are unstandardized regression coefficients estimating the impact of each policy attitude on candidate preferences (for details about the analytic procedure, see Krosnick, 1988b). This impact is quite strong among people whose attitudes on a given issue are highly important to them personally and is weak among respondents whose attitudes are unimportant.

Attitude Accessibility. One of the probable reasons why important policy attitudes are more consequential is that they are more accessible in memory and are more likely to come to mind spontaneously in the course of thinking about presidential candidates. This hypothesis can be evaluated in two ways. First, one might examine

Table 3
 1968, 1980, and 1984 National Election Studies:
 Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Association
 Between Policy Attitudes and Candidate Preferences

Issue	Low Importance		High Importance	
	1	2	3	4
1968				
Urban unrest (<i>n</i> = 1,273)	.06	.18*	.32*	.42*
Vietnam (<i>n</i> = 1,248)	.07*	.10*	.13*	.24*
1980				
Unemployment (<i>n</i> = 1,743)	.00	.17*	.28*	.32*
Defense (<i>n</i> = 2,364)	.14*	.17*	.29*	.30*
Government services (<i>n</i> = 2,319)	.01	.21*	.35*	.39*
Russia (<i>n</i> = 2,226)	.01	.08*	.17*	.30*
Abortion (<i>n</i> = 2,422)	-.11	-.03	.01	.01
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 2,157)	.09	.08*	.35*	.36*
Minorities (<i>n</i> = 2,287)	.07	.22*	.32*	.46*
1984				
Government services (<i>n</i> = 1,614)	.30	.22*	.40*	.56*
Central America (<i>n</i> = 1,460)	.02	.14*	.28*	.48*
Women (<i>n</i> = 1,588)	.18*	.20*	.26*	.43*
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 1,631)	.14	.21*	.36*	.44*
Mean	.09	.15	.27	.37

**p* < .05.

the reasons survey respondents offer for liking or disliking presidential candidates. If a particular policy attitude is highly accessible in an individual's mind, he or she should be especially likely to mention that attitude as a basis for candidate evaluation. As the results in Table 4 illustrate, there is a strong relation between policy attitude importance and accessibility as measured in this fashion. People whose attitudes on a particular policy issue are more important are also more likely to mention that attitude as a reason for liking or disliking candidates (for details about the analytic method used, see Krosnick, 1988b).

A second measure of the accessibility of an attitude is the length of time it takes an individual to report the attitude. Attitudes that people report quickly are highly accessible, whereas attitudes reported slowly are less accessible. In a series of laboratory studies, we had individuals report their attitudes on a series of political issues on a computer that timed their response latencies; they also reported the personal importance of each attitude. As Table 5 illustrates, response latencies were shorter among individuals for whom an attitude was more important. This result also supports the assertion that more important policy attitudes have more impact on candidate evaluations because these attitudes are more accessible in memory (for details, see Krosnick, 1989).

Table 4
 1968, 1980, and 1984 National Election Studies:
 Proportion of Respondents Mentioning Each Issue as a Reason
 to Vote For or Against Either of Two Presidential Candidates

Issue	Low Importance		High Importance	
	1	2	3	4
1968				
Urban unrest (<i>n</i> = 1,276)	2.8%	5.5%	10.5%	14.2%
Vietnam (<i>n</i> = 1,275)	18.0%	22.9%	29.2%	37.5%
1980				
Unemployment (<i>n</i> = 772)	16.0%	17.6%	22.5%	24.1%
Defense (<i>n</i> = 1,127)	12.0%	15.9%	16.3%	25.4%
Government services (<i>n</i> = 1,131)	4.8%	12.8%	14.5%	17.7%
Russia (<i>n</i> = 988)	1.5%	3.6%	8.9%	2.3%
Abortion (<i>n</i> = 1,233)	2.6%	3.7%	7.9%	12.0%
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 955)	9.1%	12.2%	16.2%	14.0%
Minorities (<i>n</i> = 1,016)	0.6%	2.4%	3.0%	7.0%
1984				
Government services (<i>n</i> = 1,842)	19.1%	23.2%	31.6%	31.4%
Central America (<i>n</i> = 1,664)	17.1%	21.6%	26.9%	32.8%
Women (<i>n</i> = 1,836)	0.5%	0.2%	0.2%	0.4%
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 1,884)	20.4%	21.6%	22.2%	25.8%
Mean	10.5%	13.5%	17.6%	21.0%

Perceptions of Candidates' Attitudes. People whose policy attitudes are important may find it easier to vote on that basis because they perceive relatively large differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward the policy. This claim can be tested by computing the proportion of people at various levels of attitude importance who perceive a large difference between competing presidential candidates' stands on various issues. These figures, displayed in Table 6, show that people who consider a policy attitude important are indeed more likely than those who consider it unimportant to perceive a substantial difference between competing candidates' attitudes.

Table 6 suggests that candidate perceptions partly regulate the impact of attitude importance on vote choices. Specifically, the proportion of respondents who perceived sizable candidate differences is closely related to the extent of policy voting. Across the high importance groups, the correlation between the estimates in the final columns of Tables 4 and 6 is .73. The more people perceived a substantial candidate difference, the more likely they were to vote on the basis of the issue. All this is consistent with the assertion that candidate perceptions partially mediate the effect of attitude importance. That is, attitude importance may enhance policy voting by causing the perception of larger between-candidate differences.

Attitude Stability. Important attitudes are also likely to be more consequential in elections because these attitudes are likely to be highly resistant to change. Consis-

tent with this hypothesis, important attitudes change less in response to persuasive communications administered in laboratory settings (e.g., Fine, 1957). Also consistent with this hypothesis is evidence regarding attitude change during presidential election campaigns. As Table 7 illustrates, policy attitudes that people consider more personally important were more stable during the 1980 and 1984 U.S. presidential election seasons (for details about the method used, see Krosnick, 1988a).

One likely reason for the enhanced stability of important attitudes involves access to relevant knowledge. People are probably acutely attuned to information they encounter that is relevant to policy attitudes they consider personally important, whereas information relevant to unimportant attitudes is more likely to be ignored. As a result, people probably accumulate large stores of knowledge in memory relevant to important policy attitudes and smaller amounts of knowledge relevant to unimportant policy attitudes.

Supporting this hypothesis, people who say they consider an attitude more important also say they have more relevant knowledge stored in memory and are able to report more of such knowledge (Krosnick et al., 1993). Furthermore, attitude importance is also associated with enhanced accuracy in candidate perceptions. Table 8 displays the proportions of people at various levels of importance who correctly perceived Ronald Reagan as taking more conservative stands on issues than Walter Mondale during the 1984 presidential campaign (for details, see Krosnick, 1991). As expected, there is a consistent increase in accuracy with rising importance.

To date, we have identified at least two likely mechanisms for this accuracy. First, people who care deeply about an issue are especially likely to expose themselves selectively to issue-relevant information at the expense of information rele-

Table 5
Attitude Self-Report Latencies (in Seconds)
for High and Low Importance Subjects

Issue	Low Importance	High Importance	<i>p</i>
Study 1			
Women's rights	3.71 (<i>n</i> = 59)	3.31 (<i>n</i> = 56)	.022
Abortion	4.59 (<i>n</i> = 29)	3.68 (<i>n</i> = 84)	.001
Race	4.38 (<i>n</i> = 71)	3.98 (<i>n</i> = 44)	.071
Study 2			
Abortion	4.42 (<i>n</i> = 48)	3.89 (<i>n</i> = 103)	.013
Defense	4.30 (<i>n</i> = 61)	3.91 (<i>n</i> = 91)	.028
Mean	4.28	3.75	

Table 6
 1968, 1980, and 1984 National Election Studies:
 Proportion of Respondents Perceiving a Substantial Difference Between
 Two Competing Presidential Candidates' Attitudes on a Policy Issue

Issue	Low Importance		High Importance	
	1	2	3	4
1968				
Urban unrest (<i>n</i> = 1,304)	41.2%	51.3%	58.6%	70.2%
Vietnam (<i>n</i> = 1,313)	29.5%	35.7%	44.3%	53.6%
1980				
Unemployment (<i>n</i> = 1,777)	35.2%	39.1%	48.8%	43.9%
Defense (<i>n</i> = 2,418)	46.6%	54.0%	58.9%	59.2%
Government services (<i>n</i> = 2,383)	39.3%	45.6%	52.0%	52.6%
Russia (<i>n</i> = 2,311)	43.7%	47.9%	54.1%	48.9%
Abortion (<i>n</i> = 1,849)	11.4%	13.5%	16.4%	18.8%
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 2,242)	40.3%	49.2%	54.9%	53.8%
Minorities (<i>n</i> = 2,408)	36.0%	45.9%	53.3%	57.4%
1984				
Government services (<i>n</i> = 1,841)	42.6%	59.1%	72.9%	71.6%
Central America (<i>n</i> = 1,664)	36.0%	47.4%	56.1%	65.9%
Women (<i>n</i> = 1,832)	38.9%	45.4%	54.1%	60.4%
Jobs (<i>n</i> = 1,881)	40.2%	45.7%	53.8%	60.0%
Mean	36.9%	45.0%	53.0%	58.1%

Table 7
 1980 and 1984 National Election Studies:
 Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Stability
 of Attitudes after Correction for Measurement Unreliability

Issue	Low Importance	High Importance
1980		
Government services	.61	.91
Unemployment	.19	.51
Defense spending	.59	.75
Relations with Russia	.58	.87
1984		
Government services	.52	.85
Guaranteed full employment	.60	.80
Mean	.52	.78

Table 8
1984 National Election Study: Proportions of Respondents
Perceiving Reagan as More Conservative Than Mondale

Issue	Low Importance			High Importance	
	1	2	3	1	4
Government spending	58.8%	73.5%	79.6%	80.8%	
Central America	60.0%	65.5%	73.0%	75.8%	
Guaranteed jobs	64.7%	66.8%	69.5%	74.2%	
Mean	61.2%	68.6%	74.0%	76.9%	

vant to unimportant attitudes (Berent and Krosnick, 1993a). Second, people for whom an issue is important devote large amounts of time and effort to thinking about the meaning and implications of new relevant information they receive, which strengthens the representation of this information stored in memory and facilitates recall of it later (Berent, Krosnick, and Boninger, 1993).

Another likely reason for the enhanced stability of important policy attitudes is linkage between these attitudes and core values. Conscious thought about cognitive elements linked by implicational relations enhances the consistency among these elements (e.g., Judd and Krosnick, 1989). Because important attitudes are the subject of frequent conscious consideration (Krosnick et al., 1993) and are thought to be linked to individuals' core values, these attitudes are likely to be characterized by greater consistency with these values. Consistent with this hypothesis, pairs of policy attitudes are more ideologically consistent when one or both of the attitudes involved are personally important to an individual (e.g., Jackman, 1977). Also, as Table 9 shows, personally important policy attitudes are more consistent with (liberal/conservative) ideological orientations and with values for equality and individualism.

Attitude Importance and Knowledge Structure

Having established these basic findings with regard to the effects of attitude importance, we turned in recent years to exploring more microeffects of importance on information processing. In one line of studies, we have explored the impact of importance on the structure of attitude-relevant knowledge in memory.

Theory

Although some cognitive psychological theories have described effortful and elaborative information processing strategies in which people may engage (Craik and Tulving, 1975), many social and cognitive psychological researchers maintain that people are cognitive misers and are unlikely to engage in such strategies (e.g., Fiske and Taylor, 1984). This approach suggests that only individuals with unusual motivation are willing to expend the energy required by elaborative processing (see, e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). We believe that an individual will engage in such

Table 9
 1980 and 1985 National Election Studies:
 Association Between Policy Attitudes and General Values^a

Issue	Low Importance	High Importance
Value: Liberal/conservative ideology		
Unemployment	.09	.39
Defense spending	.22	.38
Government services	.06	.60
Relations with Russia	.20	.54
Abortion	.02	.31
Guaranteed full employment	.12	.72
Aid to minorities	.19	.50
Value: Equality		
Racial integration	.58	1.00
Government services	.61	1.00
Value: Individualism		
Racial integration	.01	.59
Government services	.52	.81
Mean	.24	.62

^aCell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients estimating the effect of the value on the policy attitude.

processing when a stimulus is relevant to an attitude that the individual considers highly personally important.

Such selective elaboration is likely to influence the organization of knowledge in memory, which we conceptualize in terms of an associative network framework (Anderson, 1983; Collins and Loftus, 1975). As a simple example of this kind of organization, consider someone who believes both that people who oppose legalized abortion are typically old and that people who oppose legalized abortion are typically religious. Because both beliefs refer to characteristics of people who oppose abortion, they may become linked in memory to a node representing the characteristic they have in common (i.e., attributes of antiabortionists). This node would presumably be linked to the node representing the attitude object as well. In this way, beliefs and factual information about an object that share some common theme are linked to the object indirectly via their links to a node representing the theme.

The process of elaboration involves evaluating and relating new information to the information already stored in a person's memory. The more one thinks about a new piece of information, the more likely one is to recognize what it has in common with previously stored knowledge. As a result, one may incorporate new information into existing structures either by linking the information to existing nodes or by creating new nodes. All other things being equal, spending more time elaborating on information relevant to some object should yield more stored relations between pieces of information. Therefore, if attitude importance does indeed inspire deeper processing of relevant incoming information, it should also yield more elaborate organization of relevant knowledge in memory.

This sort of organization is likely to influence how individuals perform tasks utilizing their knowledge. For example, suppose a person whose knowledge is unorganized is asked to infer how likely it is that an elderly person favors legalized abortion. Making such a judgment requires that the person search his or her memory for any useful information. Given that unorganized knowledge provides no clues indicating where the needed information is likely to be found, the search may take a relatively long time and may yield different conclusions on different occasions. In contrast, a well-organized knowledge structure facilitates an efficient and reliable search by pointing to sensible starting points. Thus one can begin a search at nodes representing the likely characteristics of proabortionists and antiabortionists, where the needed knowledge is likely to be found.

Evidence

We conducted two studies recently to explore these hypotheses (for more details, see Berent and Krosnick, 1993b). In the first one, we assumed that the order in which pieces of information are retrieved from memory during an undirected knowledge listing task reflects how that information is organized in memory. Presumably, items linked to a common node in a cognitive structure will be generated close to each other during such tasks.

Subjects in this study listed their knowledge relevant to a political issue, formed pairs out of the pieces of knowledge they felt were similar, and then indicated the personal importance of the issue. To measure knowledge organization, we computed the average number of pieces of information listed in between the two items in each pair of related pieces of knowledge. The fewer such in-between pieces of information there are, the more organized the knowledge presumably is. As we anticipated, subjects who considered an issue important listed psychologically related pieces of knowledge closer to each other than subjects who considered an issue unimportant.

We conducted a second study in which we used a different measure of organization. In this study, subjects completed four tasks. First, subjects listed their knowledge about either abortion or capital punishment. Then subjects formed groups of pieces of knowledge that they felt were related to one another in some respect and described why they were related. Third, subjects rated each piece of knowledge according to how well it was described by each description generated during the grouping task. Finally, subjects indicated the personal importance of both abortion and capital punishment.

A measure of multidimensional organization was computed from the knowledge grouping and rating tasks data. These tasks yielded a matrix for each subject in which each cell entry indicated the applicability of a descriptor to a piece of knowledge. The sum of the squared intrasubject correlations between group descriptors is thus an indicator of the redundancy among groups formed by subjects. Using a modification of the dimensionality measure proposed by Scott, Osgood, and Peterson (1979), we computed a measure of the number of dimensions employed by a subject by subtracting the redundancy among groups from the total number of groups formed. As expected, this index was positively associated with attitude importance.

These two experiments paint a consistent picture of the positive relation between attitude importance and knowledge organization. This suggests a plausible

explanation for various previously observed effects of attitude importance. Multidimensional organization may better equip people to understand and incorporate new information easily, as well as to locate and use stored information, when they are attempting to complete attitude-relevant cognitive tasks. Consequently, attitude importance may be related to better memory (Berent, Krosnick, and Boninger, 1993) because the multidimensional organizations characteristic of important attitudes afford an efficient method of information storage and retrieval. Similarly, important attitudes may be more resistant to change and more stable over time (Krosnick, 1988b) because knowledge relevant to important attitudes is better organized, which enables people quickly to locate information needed to counterargue challenging information.

The Causes of Attitude Importance

We have demonstrated that attitudes people consider personally important have a number of structural characteristics distinguishing them from unimportant attitudes. We have also delineated the various consequences of important attitudes in information processing and social perception. Now we turn from examining the structural correlates and effects of attitude importance to exploring its causes. What makes people care deeply about some attitudes they hold while caring little about others?

Theory

Although there has been little empirical work addressing this question, social psychologists and political scientists have speculated about the causes of attitude importance and have pointed to three sorts of factors. First, an attitude may become important to an individual who perceives it to be related to her or his self-interest. Self-interest-based importance develops when a person feels that his or her rights, privileges, or life style will be directly affected by an issue in some concrete manner (Modigliani and Gamson, 1979). Second, an attitude may become personally important through social identification with reference groups or reference individuals. This may occur because a person perceives either that the rights or privileges of a group or individual with whom he or she strongly identifies are at stake (Key, 1961) or that a reference group or individual considers an attitude important (Sherif and Hovland, 1961). Finally, an attitude may become personally important if a person comes to view the attitude object as relevant to her or his basic social and personal values (Rokeach, 1968). The closer the perceived linkage between an attitude object and an individual's values, and the more important the values, the more important the attitude is likely to be to him or her (Campbell et al., 1960).

Evidence

Introspection Study. Over the last several years, we have conducted a series of studies designed to test our hypotheses regarding the causes of attitude importance (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent, in press). In an initial effort, we examined people's explanations of why they consider various attitudes personally important or unimportant. Among those explanations, self-interest accounted for 62.6% of the statements, social identification accounted for 19.3%, and values accounted for 18.1%.

Survey Studies. Next, we conducted a series of surveys in which we had subjects report the personal importance of a series of attitudes, the degree to which their self-interests were at stake in each attitude issue, the degree to which reference groups and reference individuals were affected by and concerned about each issue, and the extent to which people's cherished values were relevant to each issue. Multiple regression analyses indicated that self-interest, social identification, and values were all significant predictors of attitude importance (Table 10).

Experimental Study. Because these studies are correlational in nature, they do not provide definitive evidence regarding the causal directions of the relations they document. In an experiment designed to provide causal evidence, we manipulated self-interest by inducing subjects to imagine a self-relevant scenario involving traffic safety. Subjects who imagined being injured in a traffic accident felt that their self-interests were more related to the issue of traffic safety and attached greater personal importance to the issue than subjects who imagined an irrelevant scenario or did not imagine anything. Structural equation modeling indicated that our imagination manipulation altered the perceived likelihood of being injured in a car accident, which in turn altered perceived self-interest in traffic safety, which in turn altered attitude importance. These results are therefore consistent with the idea that increases in perceived self-interest in an issue may produce increases in attitude importance.

Implications

Each day, political events occur, and a small selection of these events are conveyed to the American public through the news media. Data are brought to the nation in convenient and discrete packages, in the morning paper and on the evening news. Between these doses of information, Americans have personal experiences that touch in one way or another on the world of politics. From this stream of data, experienced personally and received indirectly through reporters, each citizen must select what to attend to, what to think about, what to store in memory, and what to act on in the future. This is especially true during presidential election campaigns, when the volume of political information to which one has access is even greater than usual. To understand the forces that drive Americans' political behavior, partic-

Table 10
Standardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Effects
of Self-Interest, Social Identification, and Values on Attitude Importance

Issue	Predictor			r^2	n
	Self-Interest	Social Identification	Value Relevance		
Capital punishment	.50*	.27*	.15*	.53	131
Abortion	.25*	.50*	.10	.52	130
Gun control	.29*	.32*	.18*	.43	199

* $p < .05$.

ularly during elections, we must understand the processes by which information is gathered and integrated.

According to our evidence, the nation may be conceived of as an amalgamation of issue publics, groups of people with highly important attitudes toward specific policy options. Individuals tend to belong to only a few issue publics, and it seems that the majority of Americans probably fall into at least one. Issue public members share a set of common characteristics. Their attitudes toward a policy option tend to be accessible, linked to other attitudes and values, bolstered by large stores of knowledge, and resistant to change. During presidential campaigns, important policy attitudes lead individuals to attend closely to relevant information that candidates provide. People think carefully about this information, make inferences on the basis of this information to perceive candidates' positions on relevant issues, and remember this information well. As a result of this extra thought, information relevant to important issues becomes stored in elaborate knowledge structures that enable people to use the information easily when making political decisions.

These findings have a number of interesting implications for an understanding of American politics and presidential elections. Below we discuss implications regarding general models of voting, the meaning of election outcomes, the dynamics of support for incumbent presidents, candidate campaign strategies, and alienation.

General Models of Voting

The finding that importance regulates policy voting is consistent with social psychology's view of individuals as cognitive misers who base judgments on a few salient criteria instead of on complete arrays of relevant knowledge. Voters seem to simplify their voting decisions by concentrating on those policy attitudes that they consider important. This does not mean that people underutilize their attitudes on policy issues when deriving candidate evaluations in what might be called an irrational or counterproductive fashion. Rather, people seem to employ a sensible strategy that minimizes the cognitive costs of deriving candidate evaluations while maximizing subjective expected utility.

The development of a general theory of voting must include identifying the variables that regulate the impact of criteria, such as political party identification and policy attitudes, on candidate preferences. Some such research has found that when competing candidates clearly take different positions on an issue, that issue has more impact on citizens' vote choices than when candidates' positions are indistinguishable from one another (e.g., Miller et al., 1976). Our research adds to this literature by demonstrating that factors internal to the voter may also regulate policy attitude impact. Policy voting may be influenced to some degree by candidate behavior, but it will also be determined in part by the personal importance voters attach to policy attitudes.

Judging from our evidence, then, a great number of citizens seem to be both rational and responsible when electing a president. By responsible we mean, as Key (1966) did, that citizens' candidate preferences seem to be based upon their evaluations of the candidates' policy stands. By rational we mean, as Goldberg (1969) did, that people seem effectively to combine their important policy attitudes and their perceptions of candidates' policy attitudes into vote choices in a manner resembling logical deduction.

The Meaning of Elections

An important proposition in theories of representative democratic government is that election outcomes communicate messages to political leaders about their constituents' desires regarding government action. The winning candidate is presumed to be given a mandate to carry out the policies he or she endorsed during the campaign. The notion here is that "the voters (or at least a majority of them) approve of all or most of the policies presented by the victorious candidate" (Polsby and Wildavsky, 1984, p. 270).

Our research suggests that this presumption is not necessarily true. Although an election outcome does communicate policy preferences, it does not convey majority support for the winning candidate's platform. Instead, it communicates a cacophony of desires on the part of many small minorities. In the extreme, important policy attitudes could be the basis of all citizens' vote choices, while at the same time a majority of voters oppose each of the winner's policy proposals and each voter opposes a majority of the winner's policy stands (Polsby and Wildavsky, 1984).

Support for the Incumbent

Our conclusions have important implications regarding how popular support for incumbent presidents may vary between elections (see, e.g., Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilotos, 1982). If votes are indeed driven by important policy attitudes, a majority of voters (i.e., those who voted for the winner) are likely to believe that a newly elected president will advocate in favor of their preferred alternatives (or at least will not advocate passionately for ones they oppose). Therefore, popular satisfaction with an election's outcome by the majority of voters is likely immediately afterward. As a president's term progresses, however, satisfaction presumably depends upon which policies are enacted and which are forgone. Any given policy decision is not likely to please or anger a great proportion of citizens, so that each individual legislative decision is not particularly consequential for the nation's satisfaction. Among people with important attitudes toward a policy option, the balance of favorable to unfavorable attitudes will determine the gains or losses entailed by a legislative decision regarding that option. The size of an assembly of those dissatisfied with such decisions will partly determine the level of popular support a president enjoys at any particular point in time.

Candidate Campaign Strategies

Our research has highlighted the importance of political context in determining the impact that a policy attitude has on candidate evaluations. This impact is regulated by the degree to which candidates distinguish their attitudes regarding the policy from each other. When voters are unable to perceive a difference between candidates in terms of their policy attitudes on an issue, even voters whose attitudes are highly important fail to express these preferences through their votes. Thus candidates do have some power to determine an issue's impact on an election outcome by either taking or avoiding a stand regarding relevant policy options.

One strategy available to politicians is to be ambiguous. Some have argued that candidates win more votes through vagueness than they do by taking clear policy

stands (Downs, 1957). Although this may be generally true, by clearly endorsing the policy option favored by the majority of people with highly important attitudes on some issue, a candidate may win more votes than she or he loses. If a candidate disagrees with the majority of citizens on an issue, it may be best to remain silent regarding specific policy proposals.

Another possible strategy is for a politician to try to persuade citizens to adopt her or his policy stands. Our evidence suggests, however, that this strategy is unlikely to succeed. Important attitudes are highly resistant to change, and less important attitudes, which may be easily changed by a candidate, are unlikely to be expressed at the polls. Losing candidates are therefore likely to be wrong if they feel that, if they continue to educate the public to favor the policies they prefer, they will eventually win (Polsby and Wildavsky, 1984).

Candidates may also attempt to manipulate the importance of voters' policy attitudes. Candidates could potentially increase importance by prompting individuals to recognize that an issue is related to their material self-interests, significant reference groups or individuals, or cherished values. By increasing the importance of attitudes regarding a policy when a candidate's position is favored by a majority of the public, normally inconsequential attitudes may be called into action. By reducing the importance of attitudes on an issue that is a candidate's liability, losing votes may be avoided. Because bonds between aspects of the self and some attitude are probably difficult to break, however, reductions in the importance of policy attitudes are probably unusual.

Alienation

Citizens apparently want information about candidates' stands on important policy issues to arrive at their vote choices. If information relevant to those issues is not forthcoming, citizens may feel that they have little reason for supporting one candidate over the other. Consequently, when an issue is virtually invisible in a political contest, citizens for whom that issue is important may feel alienated from the race. In contrast, as a political issue becomes more central, the relevant issue public may feel more involved.

This reasoning suggests that specific issue publics may have felt more involved than others during recent presidential election campaigns. For example, some issues prominent in the 1992 campaign were the economy and jobs, health care, and abortion (Elshtain, 1993; Pomper, 1993). Citizens who cared about these issues were probably psychologically engaged during the campaign. In contrast, many foreign policy issues were given considerable attention during the 1988 presidential debates (Hershey, 1989) but were virtually absent from the political scene during the 1992 campaign (Elshtain, 1993). This decrease in attention may well have alienated those individuals who cared deeply about those issues.

Conclusion

The research summarized here represents an effort to clarify the ways in which Americans think about their government's policies and the impact of individuals' policy preferences on their political behavior. To the extent that this approach is successful, it illustrates the potential for enhancing our understanding of American politics through the application of psychological theory. Our efforts are also

devoted partly to enhancing understanding of basic psychological processes through the study of politics. To the extent that we have highlighted general principles about how attitudes function, we have illustrated the potential for political psychology to yield payoffs for psychology as well as for political science.

Note

1. We ask people about the personal importance that they attach to issues rather than attitudes because the former is a commonly used term in everyday conversation whereas the latter is a psychologist's technical term that most people use differently than we do (see Abelson, 1988, for a similar argument). Recent studies have shown that the degree of personal importance people attach to political issues is essentially identical to the degree of importance they attach to their attitudes on those issues (Fabrigar and Krosnick, 1994).

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