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New Measures of Issue Salience:
An Evaluation

Richard G. Niemi
Larry M. Bartels
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

The 1979 NES Pilot Study and the 1980 National Election Study included new items intended to measure the importance of different issues to individual respondents. Theory suggests that voters should weigh more important issues more heavily than less important issues in arriving at candidate evaluations and vote choices. However, no such differential weighting is evident using the new measures of issue salience in either the Pilot Study or the 1980 Election Study. A variety of question formats, samples, and coding schemes all lead to the conclusion that the new salience items add little or nothing to our ability to account for electoral behavior.

Different people care about different issues. In order to explain why people vote the way they do, we have to take account of these differences, weighting specific issues more or less heavily—just as voters themselves presumably do in deciding how to vote. These obvious-sounding propositions have been incorporated into our formal models of voting almost from the beginning (Davis et al., 1970, pp. 433-34).

In view of the theoretical attractiveness of salience as an explanatory concept, it is striking that empirical analyses employing operationalizations of that concept have generated very mixed results. Shapiro (1969, p. 1117), hewing as closely as possible to the so-called spatial model, noted that "the salience portion of the calculus contributes positively to the overall prediction." RePass (1971, p. 400), utilizing open-ended responses about issue concerns, found that "by and large the voting public has at least a few substantive issues in mind," and that more or less accurate perceptions of party differences on those specific issues "have a considerable impact on electoral choice." And Rabinowitz et al. (1982, p. 57) found that "any issue singled out as personally most important plays a substantially greater role for those who so view it than it does for others." On the other hand, Hinckley et al. (1974, Appendix I) found that differential weighting of issues based on whether a respondent considered an issue "very important, important, not very important, or not important at all" reduced the explanatory power of an issue voting model. Similarly, Markus and Converse (1979, p. 1065) reported that "preliminary attempts to devise a

weighting scheme based on open-ended and other responses actually led to a slight decrease in explanatory power" for their regression equation.

In 1979 and 1980, partially in response to this long and rather inconsistent set of empirical results, researchers involved in the National Election Studies made a major new effort to measure the relative salience to individual respondents of specific issues. First, a pilot survey conducted in 1979 included two fairly complicated formats for asking respondents how important they considered each of the issues included in the battery of now-standard seven-point scales. Later, one of these two formats was retained in the 1980 Election Study—for the entire battery of issues in the traditional pre- and post-election surveys, and for many of the issues included in earlier parts of the year-long study. The purpose of this note is to compare and evaluate these new approaches to operationalizing issue salience. In particular, we assess the degree to which differential weighting of issues on the basis of these new salience measures increases the usefulness of issue perceptions in accounting for candidate evaluations.[1]

THE 1979 EXPERIMENT

The National Election Study Research and Development Survey, usually called the "Pilot Study," was conducted as a two-wave panel in the spring of 1979. The sample was a small, albeit representative, national sample. In Wave I, 280 respondents were interviewed; in Wave II, 236 were reinterviewed. The primary sampling units consisted of twenty-eight congressional districts.

The Pilot Study included two separate items intended to measure the relative importance to respondents of six issues on which they placed themselves and prospective 1980 presidential candidates. In Wave I, respondents were asked directly how important each issue was to them on a scale running from zero to 100.[2] In Wave II, respondents were asked where they would place current government policy on each issue, and then were asked how important it was to them that the government continue its current policy (if it matched their own position) or change its current policy

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[1] The limitations of this approach should be obvious. For example, by relying on issues selected by the researchers rather than by the respondents, we set aside alternative approaches that let respondents define the issues from the outset. Similarly, we ignored the potential usefulness of the new salience questions for purposes other than accounting for candidate evaluations or vote choices. We are cognizant of these limitations, and we briefly comment on them in our conclusion.

[2] "Using the 0 to 100 scale [previously described to the respondent], tell me: How important is this issue to you personally? I mean, how much do you personally care about this issue?" Asked of all respondents who placed themselves on the corresponding seven-point scale.

(if it differed from their own position.)[3] The main difference between the two formats is that the second generated a considerable amount of missing data, since respondents who could not place the government's current policy on each issue scale were not asked how important it was to them that the government continue or change that policy. In other respects, the results obtained from the two formats are very similar.[4]

If these measures of salience reflect the importance of specific issues in respondents' decision making, we should expect to see a closer relationship between issue positions and candidate preferences for salient issues than for nonsalient issues. Thus, for each issue, respondents who considered the issue important should be more likely than respondents who did not consider the issue important to have candidate preferences consistent with their issue evaluations. This turns out to be true, but only to a very limited extent.

For each of six issues—defense spending, health care, guaranteed jobs, aid to minorities, relations with Russia, and social security—table 1 shows the percentage of respondents whose issue evaluations were consistent with their overall candidate evaluations. For each issue, the difference between the two columns reflects the difference between respondents who considered the issue important (scoring it more than 70 on the 0-100 importance scale) and those who considered the issue less important (scoring it 70 or less on the 0-100 importance scale). Although these differences are in the expected direction (more consistency between issue evaluations and overall evaluations for high-salience respondents than for low-salience respondents) for four of the six issues, none of the differences are large, and on average they amount to less than two and a half percentage points.[5] These results seem to suggest that the "importance" of issues—as measured in the Pilot Study—has little to do with their impact on candidate preferences.

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[3] "Now, for the issue we just talked about, your own position on the issue is the same as (different from) the position you gave to current government policy. Using the 0 to 100 scale, tell me how important it is to you for the government's policy to stay at (change so that it comes closer to) your own position?" Asked of respondents who placed themselves and "current federal government policy" on the corresponding scale.

[4] The two formats were intended to tap the same underlying dimension of issue salience, and on their face they appear to do so. Correlations between Wave I and Wave II saliences for the same issues ranged from .41 to .52—similar in magnitude to the correlations across waves (using identical formats in each) for the issue placements themselves.

[5] Our criterion for "consistency" is a relatively lenient one: for each issue the "percentage consistent" includes respondents who were equally close to both candidates on the issue, as well as respondents who were closer to one candidate, and who also gave that candidate a higher thermometer rating. Respondents who gave the two candidates identical thermometer ratings are excluded from the table.

TABLE 1

CONSISTENCY BETWEEN ISSUE EVALUATIONS AND OVERALL
CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS, BY ISSUE SALIENCE

(DATA FROM THE 1979 PILOT STUDY)

	% CONSISTENT			
	HIGH SALIENCE (>70)		LOW SALIENCE (≤70)	
Defense	84.6	(N = 123)	85.5	(N = 110)
Health	94.6	(147)	87.8	(90)
Jobs	93.7	(111)	90.6	(127)
Minorities	89.4	(85)	85.5	(152)
Russia	88.9	(108)	90.7	(129)
Social Security	90.6	(128)	88.0	(100)
Six-issue average	90.3		88.0	

Although such a conclusion seems warranted by the results in table 1, it can only be adopted provisionally on the basis of bivariate analyses, in which we treat one issue at a time, arbitrarily dichotomize the salience scales, and so on. A better test requires a somewhat less simple model in which candidate evaluations are allowed to depend on *all* of a respondent's issue evaluations, as well as on other factors such as partisan predispositions and demographic characteristics. In this context, a test of the usefulness of the NES issue salience measures involves a comparison between regression models using weighted and unweighted issue distances. If the salience measures capture an important dimension of political decision making, we should find that the regression model using weighted issue distances fits the data better than the model using unweighted issue distances.

Since the salience of issues is presumed to affect their impact on electoral decisions, we chose as our dependent variable a close substitute for actual vote choices: the comparative evaluations of presidential contenders on the NES thermometer items. (For each respondent the comparative evaluation is the signed difference between her Carter thermometer score and her Reagan thermometer score; respondents who failed to rate either candidate were assigned a neutral value for that candidate on the thermometer, so that their comparative evaluations depended solely on their evaluations of the rated candidate.)

Our independent variables consisted of comparative issue distances for the six issues shown in table 1, plus dummy variables for Strong Democrats, Weak Democrats, Independent Democrats, Independent Republicans,

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF MODELS WITH WEIGHTED AND UNWEIGHTED ISSUES

(DATA FROM THE 1979 PILOT STUDY)

	STANDARD ERROR OF ESTIMATED THERMOMETER DIFFERENCES	R^2	MEAN t-STATISTIC FOR SIX ISSUE VARIABLES	N
WAVE I				
Unweighted issues	31.7	.45	1.86	249
Issues weighted by salience	31.9	.45	1.70	246
WAVE II				
Unweighted issues	31.2	.46	1.06	220
Issues weighted by salience	31.4	.46	1.01	217

Weak Republicans, Strong Republicans, blacks, and females as control variables. In the unweighted case, we simply used the comparative distances (|Respondent—Reagan |—|Respondent—Carter |) for each of the six issues. In the weighted case, the issue variables were these same comparative distances, each weighted by the "importance" (on the 0-100 scale) assigned to that issue by the respondent. Thus, if one respondent gave health care an importance rating of 80 and another respondent gave the same issue an importance rating of 40, the perceived candidate distances for the first respondent would be weighted twice as heavily as those for the second respondent in determining overall candidate preferences in the second (weighted) model, but equally heavily in the first (unweighted) model.

In order to see which of these two models fits the data better, we compared the standard error of estimated thermometer differences and the R-squared statistic for the two specifications. We also compared the average t-statistic for the six issue variables across the two models, on the grounds that a genuine refinement in the measurement of issue effects should be reflected particularly in the precision of the parameter estimates for the issue variables. Table 2 shows the result of these comparisons for the two waves of the Pilot Study. In each wave, it is clear that the simple model including unweighted issue differences performs every bit as well as the model including issue differences weighted by salience. The trivial

differences that do exist favor the model without salience, in spite of the fact that this model makes use of less information than the model with issues weighted by salience and has the same number of parameters.

Of course, it is always possible to argue that it is our *use* of the salience measures, rather than the measures themselves, that is at fault in table 2. In order to test this possibility, we tried a variety of different formulations of the comparison between weighted and unweighted issues. For example, the Pilot Study offered respondents the opportunity to revise their "importance" ratings for individual issues *after* considering all six issues. In order to see whether it helped to let respondents reassess the importance they attached to each issue, we substituted revised weights for those respondents who provided them. The result was to increase slightly the standard error of estimate. In order to test the possibility that we introduced errors by setting the salience weight to zero for respondents who could not place themselves or one or both of the candidates on an issue, we tried deleting these respondents from both the weighted and unweighted models. This procedure reduced the sample size considerably but did not improve the fit of the weighted model relative to the unweighted model. In order to allow for the possibility that different respondents might use the "importance" scale differently, we standardized the raw salience responses so that each respondent's weights had the same mean and variance across the set of six issues. The result was to make the model with weighted issue differences look even worse relative to the model with unweighted issue differences.

THE 1980 STUDY

In order to see whether our results might be attributable to the relative weakness of political stimuli in a nonelection year, or to some quirk in the Pilot Study, we used the issue salience items in the 1980 National Election Study (identical to the Pilot Study Wave II format) to compare the performance of models with weighted and unweighted issues during the fall campaign. An advantage of the 1980 Study is that we can relate issue positions not only to candidate evaluations, as we did in the Pilot Study, but also to actual vote choices (for respondents who cast a presidential vote). As in the Pilot Study, our election year models included dummy control variables for party identification, race, and sex. They also included comparative issue distances on a series of nine issues: defense spending, government spending and services, inflation and unemployment, abortion, tax cuts, aid to minorities, relations with Russia, equality for women, and government-guaranteed jobs and standards of living. In one case these issue distances were weighted by the importance assigned to each issue by

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF MODELS WITH THERMOMETER DIFFERENCES
AND ACTUAL VOTES AS DEPENDENT VARIABLES

(DATA FROM THE 1980 ELECTION STUDY)

	STANDARD ERROR OF ESTIMATE	R^2	N
THERMOMETER DIFFERENCES			
Unweighted issues	28.6	.56	1495
Issues weighted by salience	28.8	.55	1495
ACTUAL VOTES			
Unweighted issues	.326	.58	861
Issues weighted by salience	.334	.57	861

each respondent; in the second case the issue distances were included in unweighted form.[6]

Comparisons between the models with and without salience weights are shown in table 3. Just as in the Pilot Study, it is clear that differential weighting of issues contributes nothing to our ability to account for candidate evaluations. When we turn to actual votes, the story is the same: the model including weighted issues distances has a slightly larger standard error than the model including unweighted issue distances.[7]

DISCUSSION

We have shown in a variety of ways—using different question formats, different samples, different dependent variables, and different coding schemes—that issue distances weighted on the basis of the salience items included in recent National Election Studies are no better, and sometimes slightly worse, than unweighted issue distances at accounting for respon-

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[6] In order to make our set of issues as comprehensive as possible, we included items from both the pre- and post-election waves of the 1980 study. Our dependent variables were also based on both pre-election (thermometer score) and post-election (reported vote) responses. The analysis of reported votes excluded respondents who did not vote or who voted for a candidate other than Reagan or Carter.

[7] Similar results were obtained when we used an analytic procedure designed specifically to deal with dichotomous dependent variables (logit). For ease of comparability only the ordinary least squares regression results are shown in table 3.

dents' candidate evaluations and voting decisions.[8] It is, of course, impossible to rule out the possibility that more ingenious analysts may have better luck. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the only prudent conclusion to draw from our comparisions is that issue salience, as measured in these studies, is of little use for explaining electoral choices.

It is possible to interpret our results as simply confirming the fact that people are not very good at judging the relative weight they attach to various criteria in making decisions, and that consequently any search for better ways of eliciting respondents' own testimony about the importance of different issues is doomed to failure. Markus and Converse (1979) and Rabinowitz et al. (1982) cite some of the substantial support for this interpretation in the social psychological literature.

Alternatively, the search for the effects of salience on voter choice can continue on several different fronts. One possibility is to look for still newer and better ways of asking respondents which issues they consider important. We might, for example, turn to the technique of magnitude scaling (Lodge and Tursky, 1979) in an effort to improve the validity and reliability of our salience measures. Another possibility is to focus on only one or a few issues that respondents regard as most important rather than comparing salience ratings of all issues in a survey. This approach is consistent with the creative suggestion of RePass (1971), with a model used experimentally by Herstein (1981), and with the recent work of Rabinowitz et al. (1982).[9] A third possibility is to follow up on Rabinowitz et al.'s (1982, p. 45) distinction between environmental and personal determination of salience. A fourth possibility is to attempt to infer salience from respondents' actual choices rather than from their own reports. An attempt of this sort has been made by Rivers (1983).

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[8] There is no theoretical reason to expect salience to directly affect evaluations, as distinct from its role in differentially weighting distances on different issues. However, in order to provide a classical test for interaction between issue distances and salience, we included salience as a primary effect in replications of the analyses reported in table 3. The results make it clear that salience has no appreciable primary effect. In the analysis of thermometer differences the average estimated effect of the issue salience measures was -.0069 with an average standard error of .0382; in the analysis of actual votes the average estimated effect was -.07 with an average standard error of 2.47. In both cases the standard error of estimate and the R-squared statistic were virtually unchanged from the values reported in table 3.

[9] Rabinowitz et al. (1982) worked with the "most important issue" question in the NES surveys. It is also possible to focus on a small number of important issues using only extreme responses on the issue salience scales analyzed here. In a personal communication with the authors, Jon A. Krosnick has reported finding significant differences between high-salience and low-salience respondents in the effects of issues on voting behavior. For each issue, Krosnick's comparisons are between respondents with salience scores of 100 and those with salience scores of 60 or less. Each of these groups constitutes roughly ten to twenty percent of the total sample. Thus, we are still left with no differential weighting of issue distances for most respondents on most issues.

Our own preference is to continue the search for the effects of issue salience on political evaluations—using all four of the approaches above and perhaps others as well. We do not believe that the considerable intuitive appeal of salience as an explanatory concept is totally unfounded. Issues are not equally important, and it is unlikely that voters act as if they are. Nonetheless, it remains a formidable task for future research to determine how best to measure issue salience and its impact on electoral behavior.

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