

Issue Voting and the Representation of Policy Preferences

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Abstract

Some scholars have recently questioned citizens' ability to influence government policy through elections. They have argued that policy rarely, if ever, influences citizens' voting decisions, thus preventing citizens from influencing the policies governments adopt. However, no study has ever examined the link between citizens' voting behavior and policy representation. We develop a theoretical framework which classifies different forms of issue voting and formulate expectations regarding the impact of each form on policy representation. Using Swedish data going back to 1960, we find evidence that many issues influence vote choice. By combining election study data with an original dataset on policy implementation, we show that, when issue voting that benefits governing parties occurs, popular policies are implemented. The results thus indicate that voters often vote on the basis of their policy preferences and that governments are more responsive when this gives them the strongest incentive to listen to people's preferences.

In recent years, some scholars have suggested that voters are incapable of influencing government policy. Lenz (2012) uses panel data to show that voters rarely adjust their party or candidate preferences to reflect their policy preferences but instead adopt their preferred candidate or party's positions as their own. He thus argues that citizens "follow" rather than "lead" politicians (216). These findings are echoed by the subtitle of a recent book by Achen and Bartels (2016) which suggests that "elections do not produce responsive government".

This recent research challenges an influential strand of democratic theory, according to which governments are supposed to represent citizens' policy preferences (e.g. Dahl 1989). It also goes against the undeniably strong evidence that governments do what citizens want (e.g. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; Gilens 2012; Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1983; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).¹

Furthermore, using the prudent panel-based approach to assessing the influence of policy preferences on vote choice proposed by Lenz (2012), recent studies have actually found evidence for issue voting (Matthews 2017; Mullinix 2016; Tesler 2015). Even Lenz (2012) himself found evidence that issue voting does sometimes occur. There is also evidence that citizens punish governing parties that deviate from their preferences (Wlezien 2017). Thus, not only is there evidence that representation actually occurs but there is also evidence that citizens do vote on the basis of policy. In other words, it is far from clear that citizens' voting behavior is as flawed as mentioned above and that poor policy representation is the result.

In spite of the heated debate over citizens' competence, we still know little about the implications of citizens' voting behavior for representation. According to a prominent perspective on representation, citizens vote for parties that share their policy preferences. Gov-

¹There are of course limitations to evidence of policy representation: governments are more representative of better-off citizens, there is a status-quo bias (Gilens 2012), and policies are often not congruent with majority preferences (Lax and Phillips 2012). However, overall, when citizens are more supportive of a policy change, governments generally are more likely to make that change.

ernments in turn represent those preferences, fearing that, if they fail to do so, citizens will punish them at the time of the next election (Downs 1957; Manin, Przeworski and Stokes 1999; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; Wlezien and Soroka 2016). However, to our knowledge, no published work has ever assessed the connection between *issue voting by citizens* and *policy representation by governments*. This paper aims to fill that gap.²

We develop a theoretical framework which classifies different forms of issue voting and formulate expectations regarding the impact of each form on policy representation. We argue that issue voting should influence the extent to which governments represent citizens' preferences when it gives governing parties an incentive to do so. It should give them an incentive to act on the public's preferences when those preferences line up with the government party's program (or parties' programs) or at least voters' perceptions of it (or them). When governing parties win votes among supporters of an issue because of that issue, they can both avoid losing votes from those voters and implement their policy program by putting that policy proposal into effect. However, when they lose votes among supporters of an issue proposal,

²Related questions have been studied. Research has shown that governments are most likely to do what citizens want on issues that are salient (e.g. Druckman and Jacobs 2006; Lax and Phillips 2009, 2012; Page and Shapiro 1983; Kedar 2009; Wrátil forthcoming) and that governments implement citizens' preferences more when citizens adjust those preferences in response to policy outputs by governments (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 2004). However, none of these studies clearly puts to a test the key relationship presented above. If governing parties care about re-election, they should most strongly attend to citizens' preferences on issues that influence their vote choice. That is what we aim to determine here. Salience and non-electoral responsiveness are not as relevant for government parties that want to avoid losing votes on election day. If a government party wants to know whether citizens are likely to punish it for the policies it adopts or fails to adopt, citizens' voting behavior in the previous election provides a good signal about the issues citizens care enough about to influence their vote choice.

implementing that policy would force them to be inconsistent with voters' perceptions of their position on that issue. We thus expect issue voting to matter most when supporters of a policy shift their vote choice towards parties winning an election. In such a situation, governments should be more likely to implement popular policies. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias in government policy (Gilens 2012), issue voting should have a greater impact on the implementation of popular policies than on the lack of implementation of policies that are unpopular. Policy inertia should ensure that both popular and unpopular policies are unadopted. To adopt popular policies, government parties must have a strong incentive to overcome such inertia.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to bring together voting behavior by citizens and policy representation by governments. It is not hard to understand why scholars have failed to investigate this important topic. The data necessary to conduct such an investigation are considerable. First, distinguishing the influence of policy preferences on vote choice from the influence of party preferences on opinions requires at least two waves of panel data. Associations between policy preferences and vote choice in cross-sectional data may reflect either citizens changing their vote choice to reflect their policy preferences or vice versa (Lenz 2012). Second, determining whether a policy position was implemented requires a massive dataset of the kind created by Gilens (2012) for his work on the representation of rich and poor Americans. This is the first study to combine two such data sources.

The data necessary to assess the relationship between issue voting and policy representation are available in Sweden. We use panel data from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) going back to 1960 to assess the extent to which issues influence vote choice. We then use an original dataset on policy implementation to determine whether issue voting increases the influence of issue opinions on government policy. We show that, governments are more likely to implement popular policies when they gain votes from supporters of a policy change.

The results suggest that representative democracy can work well. When citizens care

enough about an issue for it to influence their vote choice and they shift their vote choice in a way that gives government parties an incentive to represent citizens' preferences, governments act on their preferences. While far from an ideal of a democracy in which governments care how citizens feel about issues and *systematically* adapt government policies to citizens' preferences, the image of representative democracy suggested by our study relies on citizens' interest in issues as well as parties' interest in re-election.

Issue Voting and Representation

How do citizens get governments to do what they want them to do? Two major mechanisms have been proposed in the literature. First, people can get the policy they want by electing representatives who share their preferences. Second, elites can follow citizens' preferences in order to win re-election (Miller and Stokes 1963; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; Manin, Przeworski and Stokes 1999). We focus on the second mechanism. We argue though that the pursuit of votes by government parties is most effective as a mechanism of representation when it allows those parties to follow their own issue positions (or at least those citizens perceive them to have).

This second mechanism has been most clearly formulated in the rational-choice spatial-modeling approach to politics. According to proponents of that view, parties adapt their policy programs and governments adapt their policies to citizens' preferences, in order to maximize their vote share (Downs 1957). Typically, scholars present such issue voting as occurring along a single left-right ideological dimension (Davis, Hinich and Ordeshook 1970). In this model, parties converge towards the median voter and governments adopt the right level of taxation and government spending to maximize their proximity to that representative voter (Downs 1957, 57).

There is considerable evidence that parties adapt their positions on the left-right dimension to reflect changes in citizens' policy preferences especially when the public moves away

from the parties (Adams et al. 2004, 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013). These studies show that parties care about citizens' preferences. However, parties only really have an incentive to care about those preferences if policy preferences influence citizens' vote choices. Issue voting should therefore be a necessary condition for this form of policy representation.

Debates among scholars of issue voting have largely focused on how policy preferences get translated into party preferences (e.g. Blais et al. 2001; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008). At the same time, there is a long line of research that has been skeptical that issues actually influence vote choice. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1968) found that citizens tend to vote on the basis of their demographic characteristics rather than short-term factors like issue opinions. Campbell et al. (1960) found that citizens tend to have a stable orientation towards a party over time, and thus doubted that issues have much if any impact on vote choice (172). Their perspective is supported by a recent study (Lachat 2015) showing that citizens who identify with a party rely less on their issue opinions when deciding how to vote.³

It is far from clear that voters' positions on individual policy issues have any influence on their voting behavior (Campbell et al. 1960, 185-187). As Brody and Page (1972) pointed out, merely finding that policy preferences coincide with vote choice does not mean that the former influence the latter. Such an association may in fact reflect "persuasion" effects, whereby citizens are persuaded by their preferred party to adopt its position (457).

Lenz (2009, 2012) put such a possibility to the test. He assessed the relationship between issue preferences and vote choice using panel data in a large number of cases where prior

³There have also been doubts about the nature of citizens' issue preferences. Converse (1964) found that citizens' attitudes on policy issues are unstable "non-attitudes" which are unlikely to influence vote choice. Although subsequent research has shown that ideology has resonance for many voters (Jacoby and Armstrong 2014), other authors argue that citizens are "innocent of ideology" (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

studies, using cross-sectional data, had concluded that issue preferences influenced vote choice. He found evidence that issues mattered in only one case, defense spending and approval of George W. Bush between 2000 and 2002, a case he replicated from Ladd (2007).⁴ In the others, instead of policy preferences influencing vote choice, Lenz found that citizens adapt their policy preferences to their vote choice.

Such findings can be explained by the growing literature on party cue effects. Early work on political behavior argued that citizens' opinions are influenced by the party with which they identify (Belknap and Campbell 1952; Campbell et al. 1960). More recently, and, beginning with Cohen (2003), scholars have found that, when citizens are exposed to the policy position of the party with which they identify in the context of an experiment, they adapt their opinion on that issue to make it more reflective of their party's position.⁵

While numerous studies have found evidence for party cue effects (Bullock 2011), there is no reason to expect the direction of causality between issues and party preferences to always go from party to issues. The authors of *The American Voter*, in spite of their belief in the influence of party identification, argued that voters can change their party if they hold a position that is inconsistent with their party's stance on an issue that matters to them (169). Even if citizens are biased reasoners, their issue attitudes may matter to

⁴He also found evidence that the center-right governing parties in the Netherlands adapted their position on nuclear power to reflect changing preferences by citizens following Chernobyl and that Jimmy Carter adapted his position on defense spending to reflect changes in Americans' preferences in that domain. Crucially, because of these changes in party positions, citizens did not have the opportunity to vote on the basis of these issues.

⁵Recent research has argued that people's tendency to follow their party's positions results from partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Leeper and Slothuus 2014) and shown that it is strongest when parties engage in conflict over policy (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Guntermann 2017; Mullinix 2016).

their vote choice and there is no reason why the attitudes citizens seek to support should always be their party preferences. Mullinix (2016) shows that, when citizens are induced to consider an issue important to them, they are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning to support their policy preferences. Relatedly, Tesler (2015) showed that policy-relevant attitudes influence vote choice when they are crystallized. Also, as mentioned previously, Lenz (2012) found evidence that opinions on one of the issues he considered influenced vote choice. Furthermore, Matthews (2017) showed that, when including small parties, undecided voters, and non-voters in analyses, issue voting occurs on some of the issues on which Lenz found no issue voting. Thus, even if issues do not matter most of the time, this does not imply that they never matter.

The fact that citizens sometimes vote on the basis of issues may help account for one of the recurring findings in studies of policy representation. A considerable body of research has considered the relationship between the public's policy preferences and government policy. Most of these studies have found a strong overall relationship (Burstein 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2016).

In the United States, Monroe (1979) and Page and Shapiro (1983) found that, most of the time, when a majority of Americans favor a policy, the government implements that policy. Evidence from other countries suggests similar levels of policy representation as in the US (e.g. Petry and Mendelsohn 2004). Moreover, Gilens (2012) found that the probability of a policy's implementation in the US increases monotonically with the proportion of the population that favors it. He did identify two limitations to policy representation. One is that the preferences of better-off citizens have more influence on government policy. The second is that there is a status quo bias. In other words, most policy changes do not get adopted and change only occurs if a large proportion of citizens want one to occur. Using a dynamic approach, Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) and Soroka and Wlezien (2010) provide further evidence of policy representation by government. They found that government policy

tracks public preferences over time.⁶

However, none of these studies consider whether issue voting influences representation. The closest to assessing that link is the finding by Soroka and Wlezien (2010) that responsiveness by citizens to changes in government policy conditions government responsiveness to their preferences and the finding that policy representation is higher on high-salience issues (Druckman and Jacobs 2006; Lax and Phillips 2009, 2012; Page and Shapiro 1983). However, it is unclear why salience in general should matter to representation. If parties in government care about their re-election, shouldn't they care most about whether an issue influences citizens' vote choice?⁷

Types of Issue Voting and Incentives for Representation

The relationship between citizens' vote choice and government policy was most clearly formulated by Downs (1957). However, given Downs' reliance on citizens' policy preferences as

⁶The exception is Brooks (1985, 1987, 1990), who found a weaker relationship between public opinion and policy. There is also evidence that parties have ignored certain aspects of citizens' policy preferences. Thomassen (2012) notably showed that parties in the Netherlands have ignored citizens' preferences on the libertarian-authoritarian dimension.

⁷One important question is how parties know about the importance of issues to voters. If scholars have a hard time assessing issue voting, as Lenz (2012) has shown, how can we expect parties to do any better? The answer is that parties have developed both sophisticated and simple methods to study citizens' attitudes in order to identify the most effective political strategies. The field of political marketing has documented the methods parties have come up with. These are both quantitative and qualitative and include surveys conducted at various points before, during, and after election campaigns, focus groups, comments from voters, newspapers, and the analysis of big data (Lees-Marshment 2014, Chapter 3). The difference between parties and scholars is that the former observe developments in real time, while the latter can only analyze data after the fact.

summarized by the single left-right ideological scale, his work does not provide clear expectations about when and how issue voting induces parties to act on the public's preferences. We, therefore, propose a theory of when issue voting should matter.

We rely on the key assumption in the model developed by Downs (1957) that parties seek to maximize their votes. However, we neither assume that citizens have preferences that can easily be summarized by the left-right scale nor that their policy preferences necessarily influence their vote choice. Instead, we determine empirically the issues that matter to voters.

As Lenz (2012) argues, it is difficult to study issue voting because associations between issue positions and vote choice found in a cross-sectional survey can result from citizens changing their policy preferences to reflect their vote choice as much as changing their vote choice to reflect their issue positions. We share his concern and, following him, analyze changes in vote choice using panel data.

We adopt the broadest definition of issue voting as it relates to government parties. We define issue voting as any decision that is associated with policy preferences to shift one's vote choice in the direction of or away from a government party. Thus, it includes both shifting from a party that opposes a policy change to one that supports it, the reverse shift, a shift from a party that supports a change to one that supports it even more, a shift from a party that opposes a change to one that opposes it even more and even a shift from a party with a particular position to another with the same position. All that matters is that citizens' issue preferences influence the change in vote choice. Given findings by Grofman (1985) and Kedar (2005, 2009) that citizens can consider their policy preferences when voting without voting for a party that shares their position, it is important to consider a range of vote changes that correspond to issue positions.

We focus on issue voting during election campaigns. They are an important time to consider issue voting, because it is during campaigns that citizens are exposed to the greatest amount of information about party positions. There is considerable evidence that citizens

learn about party positions during campaigns (e.g. Alvarez 1997; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Brians and Wattenberg 1996). Gelman and King (1993) argue that, by learning party positions during a campaign, citizens learn to connect their political attitudes to vote choice. Election campaigns and their coverage in the media also raise the salience of issues to vote choice (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Thus, acquiring information about party positions and exposure to campaigns which focus on particular issues may lead citizens to adjust their votes to their policy preferences. Of course, issue voting likely occurs outside of campaigns. However, given the importance of campaigns and the availability of data from campaigns, we focus on them here.

We expect issue voting in general to matter most for the implementation of popular policies. As Gilens (2012) found in the US, there is a strong status quo bias in policy change. Only a fraction of potential policies are actually implemented. Thus, unpopular policies remain unimplemented due to inertia. Issue voting should matter most when it comes to implementing policies that large proportions of the population support. When citizens care enough about popular policies that they influence their vote choices, governments should overcome that inertia and implement those policies.

We consider issue voting to occur when issue preferences are associated with changes in support for governing parties during a campaign. We consider three forms. *Total issue voting* is the total change in support for government parties that is related to an issue. It is the absolute difference between changes in support for government parties (to and from opposition parties) during the campaign among citizens who support a policy and among citizens who oppose it. In other words it is the sum of all votes gained and lost by government parties as a result of an issue proposal. This first type of issue voting encompasses the second and third types. *Opposition-to-government issue voting* is how much more support for government parties increases among policy supporters than among opponents. Finally, issue voting can occur when government parties lose more support among those who favor a policy than among policy opponents. We call *government-to-opposition issue voting* the

difference between losses in support for government parties among policy supporters and opponents.

We expect the specific form of issue voting to make a key difference. As Downs (1957) argued, parties care about being reliable and responsible. Reliability is the ability to predict a party's behavior following an election by its statements during the campaign. Responsibility is the consistency of a party's actions and statements over time. According to Downs, both reliability and responsibility are key to rational vote choice, because they allow people to make predictions of the future. Parties care about being reliable and responsible, because these traits are what allow them to win the confidence of voters (105-108). Tavits (2007) showed that parties can be punished for changing their positions, particularly on matters of principle. Relatedly, work on the fulfillment of parties' election pledges has shown that parties fulfill most of their pledges, suggesting that parties do what they promise (Thomson et al. 2017).

If citizens decide to support a government party because of an issue proposal they believe it supports, the party can implement that policy and remain consistent with its position, at least as perceived by voters. Conversely, if people shift their votes away from a party because they believe it opposes a policy, implementing it would mean sacrificing its reliability and responsibility. Thus, when government parties lose votes among supporters of a policy, there is a conflict between parties' incentive to avoid losing votes on issues that matter to voters and their incentive to remain consistent over time.

Opposition-to-government issue voting should give governing parties more of an incentive to implement a popular policy than government-to-opposition issue voting. Both should lead parties to care about public opinion in order to seek to gain votes or avoid losing votes. However, the incentive to cater to public opinion in the case of the latter should be countered by the incentive to remain consistent over time. Thus, the effect of government-to-opposition issue voting on policy representation should be weaker. Recall also that issue voting should matter most to policies that are popular because unpopular policies should be unadopted

by default. We thus have two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 *Issue voting increases the likelihood that popular policies are implemented during the subsequent government mandate.*

Hypothesis 2 *Opposition-to-government issue voting more strongly increases the likelihood that popular policies are implemented than government-to-opposition issue voting.*

Data and Methods

We rely on election panel survey data from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) in combination with an original dataset on the implementation of policy proposals asked about in the surveys. We use all (pre- and post-election) panel studies from 1960 to 2010, except for the 1970 study, which only consisted of a single wave. The implementation dataset was made specifically for the SNES dataset. In other words, coders determined whether the issue proposals asked about in the election studies were implemented during the mandate of the government formed following the election.⁸

The dependent variable in all analyses of issue voting is a binary vote choice variable indicating a vote for the party (or one of the parties) that ended up in government after the election. We consider issue voting to occur when citizens with a given policy preference adjust their party choice to reflect that policy preference. Since other voters may move in

⁸We exclude the 1956 study, because it did not include any question on overall policy orientations that could be used as a control. It also only asked about one policy issue. We also exclude the election studies conducted for the national referendums and European Parliament elections. We do not include the most recent election study (from 2014), because data on policy implementation are not yet available. Twenty-eight of the SNES questions were about support for status quo policies. In these cases, we recoded them to be about changes away from the status quo. Results are similar when these issue proposals are removed from the dataset.

the same direction, we consider issue voting to occur to the extent that changes in support for a party are greater among supporters of a policy change than among opponents. If those who support a policy proposal move their votes in a particular direction more than those who oppose the change, the difference between these changes can be seen as reflecting the effect of an issue on vote choice.

Prior studies of issue voting control for a predisposition allowing them to determine whether changes in vote choice are due to a particular policy and not simply to voters' general political orientations. Typically, scholars control for party identification (Lenz 2012; Matthews 2017). However, the concept of party identification has been much more controversial in Europe than in the US. The classic critique by Thomassen (1976) is that party identification is less stable than vote choice in the Netherlands and is thus clearly not a predisposition (77). In Sweden, Holmberg (1994) found that party identification is essentially indistinguishable from vote choice (96). It is thus far from clear that party identification is a predisposition in Sweden. The models reported in this paper, therefore, control for citizens' self-placements on the left-right ideological scale, which has conventionally been seen as a summary measure of citizens' policy preferences (e.g. Dalton 2017). This control allows us to ensure that changes in vote choice are due to specific policy preferences and not to more general policy attitudes.⁹

Following Lenz (2012) and Matthews (2017), we run linear probability models of vote choice.¹⁰ Like Lenz (2012), we use panel data to assess issue voting. We run simpler models though in which we regress post-election vote choice on pre-election vote choice and the

⁹To reassure readers who are not convinced by the critique of party identification, in other models, we control for both ideology and party identification as robustness checks. We were able to run these models for a reduced set of elections (from 1968 to 2010) in which election studies asked about partisanship. Results are in the Online Appendix (Section 4).

¹⁰We also run logistic regression models of vote choice, these can be found in Section 3 of the Online Appendix.

other right-hand-side variables. In addition to being simpler than the models with stacked data that Lenz uses, they have the added advantage of controlling for regression to the mean (Finkel 1995).

While policy preference questions were asked in different ways in different studies, we standardize the coding across issues and studies so that respondents who oppose a proposal are coded 0 and those who support it are coded 1, regardless of the strength of those positions. Respondents who assert that they neither support nor oppose a change are coded 0.5. Those who answer that they do not know or who refuse to answer were dropped. We adopted this coding scheme due to variations in response options across issues. There were two major variations across issue questions. Some included a neutral ambivalent category, while others did not and some issue questions assessed the intensity of support and opposition. We rescaled ideology from 0 to 1.¹¹

For each issue, we regressed post-election vote choice on pre-election vote choice, policy preferences, and pre-election ideological self-placement. We ran separate models for each issue, because it was not always clear whether some issue positions caused others. If preferences on one issue caused preferences on another, coefficients on the former in a model controlling for the latter would be biased. For the same reason and because the questions asked varied across surveys, we did not attempt to include all determinants of vote choice. The disadvantage of our necessarily underspecified models for each issue is that some of the significant relationships may be spurious (due to other issue preferences or even non-issue attitudes). However, ending up with some false positives at the first stage simply makes the second stage regression, where we assess the impact of issue voting on policy representation, more conservative.

Here is the regression equation we ran for each issue proposal:

¹¹Respondents with missing values on ideology were given the median ideology score to avoid losing observations.

$$\text{Vote Choice}_{post} = \alpha + \beta_1 * \text{Vote Choice}_{pre} + \beta_2 * \text{Opinion}_{pre} + \beta_3 * \text{Ideology}_{pre} + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

We assess the level of issue voting by taking the coefficient on the pre-election opinion variable from each of these models. It represents the difference in the change in the probability of voting for a governing party between a respondent who opposes an issue proposal and one who supports it. We test the significance of the opinion coefficient for each issue using two-tailed t-tests.

The second approach we use for the first stage analysis is a logistic regression with the same model as in equation (1) but with a logistic link function. We then calculate the difference between the change in the probability of voting for a government party (between the pre- and post-election studies) among policy supporters and policy opponents and retain this as our measure of issue voting. Equation (2) shows the formula.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Issue Voting} = & (P(\text{Government party})_{post,supporter} - P(\text{Government party})_{pre,supporter} \\ & - (P(\text{Government party})_{post,opponent} - P(\text{Government party})_{pre,opponent}) \quad (2) \end{aligned}$$

For both approaches, we obtain three measures of issue voting. Total issue voting is simply a dummy indicating that the coefficient on the opinion variable is significant (and thus either positive or negative), opposition-to-government issue voting is assessed by a dummy indicating that the coefficient is significantly different from 0 and positive (significantly negative values are excluded from analyses using this variable), government-to-opposition issue voting is measured by a dummy indicating that the coefficient is significant and negative (significant positive values are excluded). All these significance tests are based on two-tailed t-tests using a 0.05 significance level. Note that we also ran all second-stage analyses using analogous continuous measures of issue voting and results are similar. These are in Section 5 of the Online Appendix.

At the second stage, we assess the impact of issue voting on the link between public opinion and policy implementation. We create a binary variable indicating that a policy proposal was implemented during the term following an election. We then run a linear regression of that variable on the interaction between the percentage of survey respondents who support a policy change and the measure of issue voting. We also include an interaction with overall changes in the proportion supporting government parties between the pre- and post-election survey waves. This second variable allows us to ensure that the coefficients on our measures of issue voting are not merely picking up the impact of overall changes in votes during the campaigns. Equation 3 shows the model. Here we present results using linear models. Results using logistic regression models are similar and are in the Online Appendix (see Section 6).

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Policy Implemented} = & \alpha + \beta_1 * \text{Public Support} + \beta_2 * \text{Issue Voting} \\
 & + \beta_3 * \text{Total Changes} + \beta_4 * \text{Issue Voting} * \text{Public Support} (\%) \\
 & + \beta_5 * \text{Total Changes} * \text{Public Support} (\%) + \epsilon \quad (3)
 \end{aligned}$$

We include all issues that were asked about in the pre-election studies. We limit first-stage analyses to respondents who participated in both the pre- and post-election studies, for whom we can assess changes in vote choice. In total, we have 202 observations on 81 unique issue proposals. Table A1 in the Online Appendix lists all the issues we have included as well as the years of the elections in which the pre-election studies asked about them. Note that our measures of public support include non-responses so that they show the proportion of all Swedes who want a policy change rather than the proportion of Swedes with an opinion.

One important consideration is the sample of issues we focus on. We assess issue voting on all issues that were included in the SNES. It is unclear whether that sample is representative of the universe of issues that could have been asked about. The SNES asked about issues

that were salient in each election. Limiting our analyses to issues that are considered salient enough to election scholars allows us to control for salience. If we find that, among salient issues, representation is best on issues that matter to vote choice, we can safely conclude that issue voting and not simply salience is what matters.

How Much Issue Voting Occurred?

Figure 1(a) shows the amount of total issue voting (the absolute value of the coefficient on the opinion variable from the first stage) on each issue that has been asked about in Swedish National Election Studies going back to 1960. It labels the five issues with the greatest amount of issue voting. The issues for which we find the most issue voting are politically-heated issues that were clearly very salient issues at the time. A good example is the issue about whether to introduce wage-earner funds, which was a policy proposal by the Social Democrats which would gradually introduce collective employee ownership of private companies. Figure 1(b) shows the relationship between the percentage-point change in votes associated with each issue (i.e. the raw coefficient on the opinion variable) and public support for it. The correlation between the two is 0.19 ($p=0.01$). There is thus a weak tendency for there to be a greater shift in votes towards government parties due to issue proposals when more citizens support that policy change.

Figure 1: Amount of Issue Voting

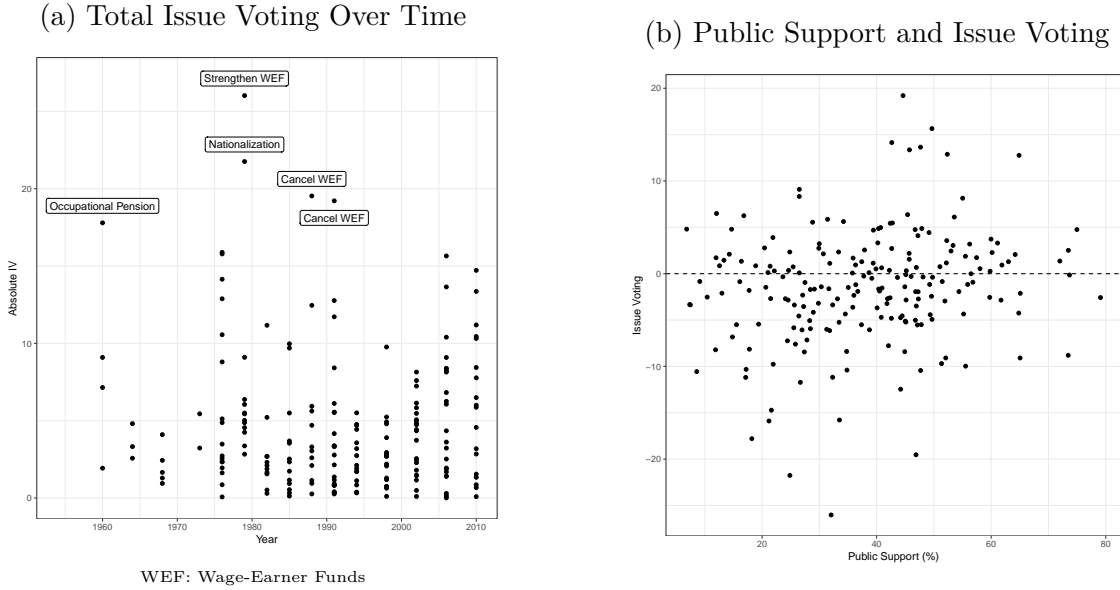


Table 1 shows descriptive statistics on the amount of issue voting as assessed using the linear-model approach. For each type of issue voting, we present the percentage of issues with significant issue voting as well as the minimum, median, maximum, and mean values of significant values.

Table 1: Amount of issue voting

Type	% $p < 0.05$	Min	Median	Max	Mean
Total	37.1	3.54	7.60	26.02	8.81
Opposition-to-Government	11.9	4.10	5.99	19.21	8.35
Government-to-Opposition	25.2	3.54	8.14	26.02	9.02

While most issues do not influence vote choice, we estimate that over a third do matter to voters. Support for proposals is associated with losses of support by government parties about twice as often as it is associated with gains by them. This does not mean that issues overall hurt government parties, because, as we saw above, there is a positive (albeit weak) association between support for policy proposals and the estimated change in votes that is due to an issue. In other words, the issues whose support are associated with losses by

government parties tend to be issues with lower public support than those that are associated with gains. Consequently, parties could gain votes by opposing the former issue proposals and supporting the latter.

Does Issue Voting Influence the Representation of Preferences?

We first describe the relationship between public support for the policy proposals we consider and their implementation. Figure 2a shows the relationship between the percentage of the Swedish population that wants a new policy to be implemented and the implementation of each policy. We calculate the percentage of policies that are implemented in various ranges of ten percentage points of public support. We also include a rug plot to show the distribution of public support for policies. As we can see, the probability of implementation jumps dramatically when public support increases from low (i.e. below 30%) to moderate (at and above 30%) values. Above 30% support, however, the probability of implementation does not increase as support goes up. In fact, it actually declines slightly.

Figure 2: Public Support For Policy Proposals and their Implementation

(a) Overall Public Opinion

(b) Supporters of Government Party(ies)

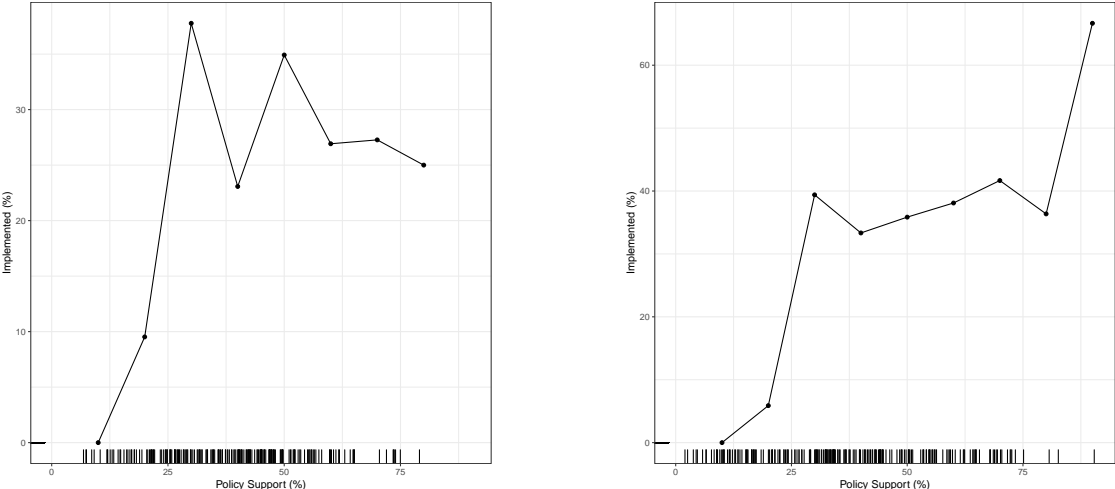


Figure 2b considers the relationship between support for a change among survey respondents who voted for the government parties and implementation. It allows us to determine whether governments were simply doing what their supporters wanted them to do. Some existing studies show that some parties care most about the preferences of their supporters (Ezrow et al. 2011; Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013). Here, the rug plot shows the distribution of support for policies among supporters of government parties. The graph suggests that government parties do care more about their supporters. There is a similar jump in the proportion of policies that are implemented from low to moderate values of support. The difference among supporters of government parties is that the likelihood of implementation jumps again as support moves to very high values. However, this reflects only three issues with very high (over 80 per cent) support among government party voters. Two of those were implemented. Moreover, note that support for policy proposals is higher among government party supporters than in the public overall. Thus, the increase in implementation at high values of support might just reflect a process of rationalization whereby supporters of government parties express higher support for policies that were promised by the party they voted for.¹² In short, there is little evidence that public opinion or the preferences of supporters of government parties directly influence policy implementation when support increases beyond a low level.

Does issue voting make a difference to policy representation? We begin with a simple test. We compare the proportion of policies with majority (i.e. 50% + 1) support that were adopted in the presence of each type of issue voting and the proportion that were adopted when there was no issue voting.¹³ When there was no issue voting of any kind, 19%

¹²We produced analogous graphs for a broader sample of issues including those asked about in SOM (Society Opinion Media) surveys in addition to the Swedish Election Studies. The patterns are very similar. See Online Appendix, Section 2.

¹³Note that the 50 per cent threshold is somewhat arbitrary. Using other thresholds for high support leads to similar results.

of popular policy proposals were implemented. When there was evidence for issue voting, 44 percent of popular proposals were implemented. Seventy-five percent of proposals with majority support were implemented when there was opposition-to-government issue voting. However, government-to-opposition issue voting essentially made no difference to policy implementation. When there was that form of issue voting, only 20% of popular policies were adopted. This lack of influence of government-to-opposition issue voting is consistent with our expectations. Government parties have an interest in remaining consistent with the positions that voters at least perceive them as having.

Figure 3(a) shows the relationship between public support for policy changes and their implementation by the type of issue voting. It calculates the proportion of policies in 20 percentage-point intervals of public support. We can see that the proportion of implemented policies increases with public support on issues with significant opposition-to-government (Opp-to-Govt) issue voting (note that there was no significant opposition-to-government issue voting on proposals with public support below 20 percent). When government-to-opposition (Govt-to-Opp) issue voting is significant, on the other hand, implementation only increases with public support when it goes above 60 per cent.

Figure 3: Issue Voting, Public Support, and Policy Implementation

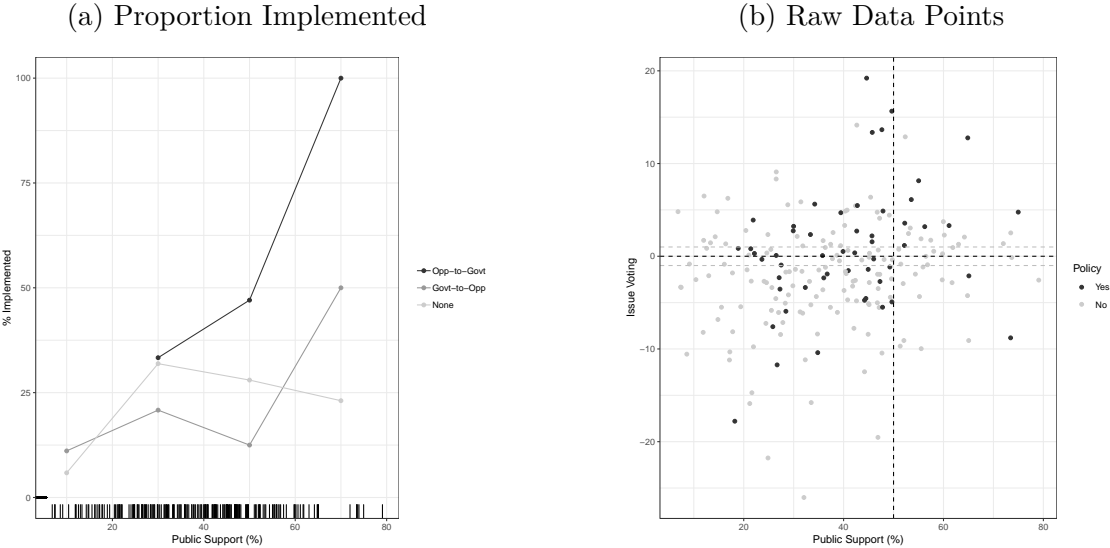


Figure 3(b) shows the same data points as in Figure 1(b). However, it now shows whether policy proposals were implemented or not. It also shows a vertical dashed line at 50 per cent public support to distinguish policies with majority support from those lacking such support. It also includes a horizontal dashed line at 0 issue voting (in black), allowing us to distinguish opposition-to-government from government-to-opposition issue voting. It, furthermore, includes lighter dashed lines at -1 and 1 issue voting, allowing us to identify issues with at least that much issue voting. We can see clearly that, while eight popular proposals that were implemented had opposition-to-government issue voting, only two proposals with majority support that were implemented had government-to-opposition issue voting. None of the popular issues that were implemented led to changes in support for government parties of less than one point in absolute value. Implementation of popular proposals was thus clearly associated with gains by governing parties that were associated with issue opinions.

We then adopted a more rigorous test. We ran linear regressions of the binary policy implementation variable on public support for the policy change, the measures of issue voting, the total change in vote shares for the government party (or parties), and interaction terms between public support and each of the latter two variables. Table 2 shows the results. The coefficients of interest are those on the interactions between each form of issue voting and public support. The results from Model 1 show that the coefficient on the interaction between total issue voting and the proportion of public support is positive. However, it is far from conventional significance levels. Model 2 shows that opposition-to-government increases the weight of public opinion on policy adoption more than either total or government-to-opposition issue voting. In the third column, we can see that government-to-opposition issue voting clearly has no effect on the influence of public opinion on policy change. These findings provide initial support for Hypothesis 1, that issue voting increases the likelihood that popular policies are implemented, and Hypothesis 2 that opposition-to-government issue voting matters more to policy implementation than government-to-opposition issue voting.

Table 2: Models of Issue Voting and Policy Implementation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.35*	0.29	0.33*
	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.16)
Public Support (%)	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Total IV	-0.23		
	(0.18)		
Opp-to-Gov IV		-0.75	
		(0.47)	
Gov-to-Opp IV			-0.10
			(0.19)
Total Changes	-2.20	-1.04	-1.73
	(2.06)	(2.44)	(2.03)
Total IV*Public Support (%)	0.01		
	(0.00)		
Opp-to-Gov IV*Public Support (%)		0.02*	
		(0.01)	
Gov-to-Opp IV*Public Support (%)			0.00
			(0.01)
Total Changes*Public Support (%)	0.06	0.02	0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
<i>N</i>	202	151	178
<i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.06	0.01
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.01	0.03	-0.01
Resid. sd	0.44	0.45	0.43

Standard errors in parentheses

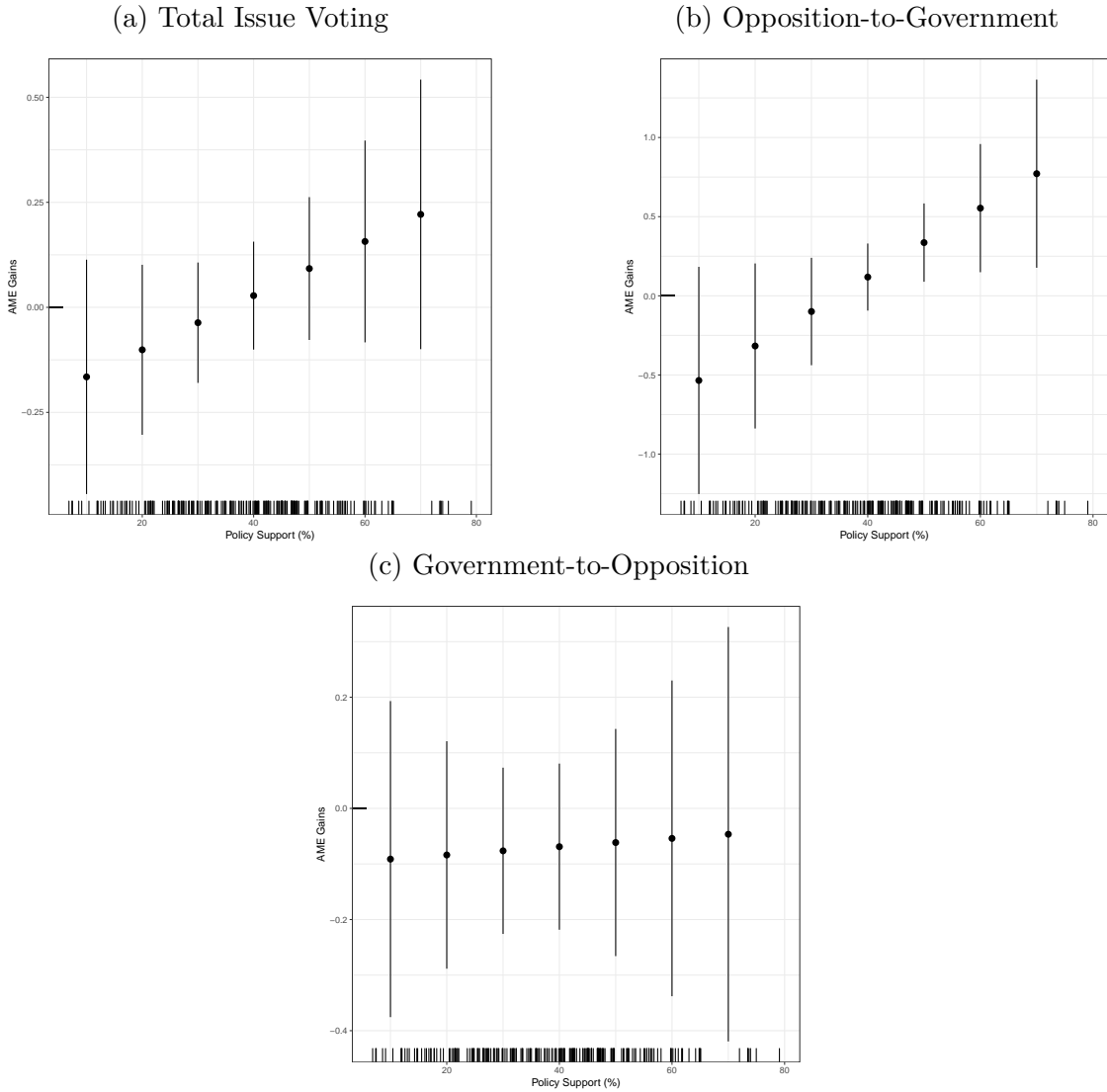
* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Hypothesis 1 states that issue voting increases the implementation of popular policies. To more directly test this expectation, we consider the marginal effects of each form of issue voting at various levels of public support for policy changes.¹⁴ If issue voting improves policy representation, we should find that, at high levels of public support for a policy, issue voting increases the probability of policy adoption. Confidence intervals on the marginal effect of issue voting should thus only cover positive values at high levels of public support. As we can see in panel (a), total issue voting does not significantly influence the probability of implementation at any level of public support. Opposition-to-government issue voting, as shown in panel (b), has an effect on policy implementation that is significant for levels of support of 50% and higher. Government-to-opposition issue voting, as panel (c) shows, has no effect on policy representation. These marginal effects provide support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2.

We expected issue voting to increase the likelihood that popular policies are implemented. However, as Berry, Golder and Milton (2012) suggest, most theories involving interactions have implications for looking at the relationship the other way around. Not only do we expect issue voting to increase the probability that popular policies are implemented. We also expect public support for a policy change to matter more for the implementation of issue proposals that influence vote choice. In other words, the marginal effect of public support for a change should be larger when issue voting is significant, particularly when opposition-to-government issue voting is significant, than when it is not. Section 7 of the Online Appendix assesses these expectations about the other side of the interaction effect and finds that public support for a policy change does in fact matter more when opposition-to-government issue voting is significant.

¹⁴Note that these marginal effects plots, like all others we report, include rug plots of the distribution of support for policy changes.

Figure 4: Types of Issue Voting and the Probability of Policy Implementation



As an illustration, Table 3 shows an example of an issue that has been asked about repeatedly in Swedish election studies: lowering taxes. Three of the six times Swedes were asked about the issue, majorities supported tax cuts. In all but one case, over 45 per cent of Swedes wanted a tax cut. Here, we lower the somewhat arbitrary threshold for high support to 45 percent to reflect actual support for a tax cut in Sweden. In the two cases in which there was opposition-to-government issue voting and strong support for tax cut, taxes were reduced. In only one case (2002) out of three without opposition-to-government issue voting and with high support for tax cuts, were taxes actually lowered. Thus, although Swedes

almost always wanted a tax cut, they were much more likely to get a tax cut when they voted in a way that gave the parties in government an incentive to actually cut their taxes.

Table 3: Issue Voting and Tax Cuts

Year	Support for Tax Cut (%)	Opp-to-Govt IV	Tax Cut?
1964	79.08	No	No
1968	36.32	No	No
1998	61.72	No	No
2002	49.26	No	Yes
2006	55.02	Yes	Yes
2010	45.73	Yes	Yes

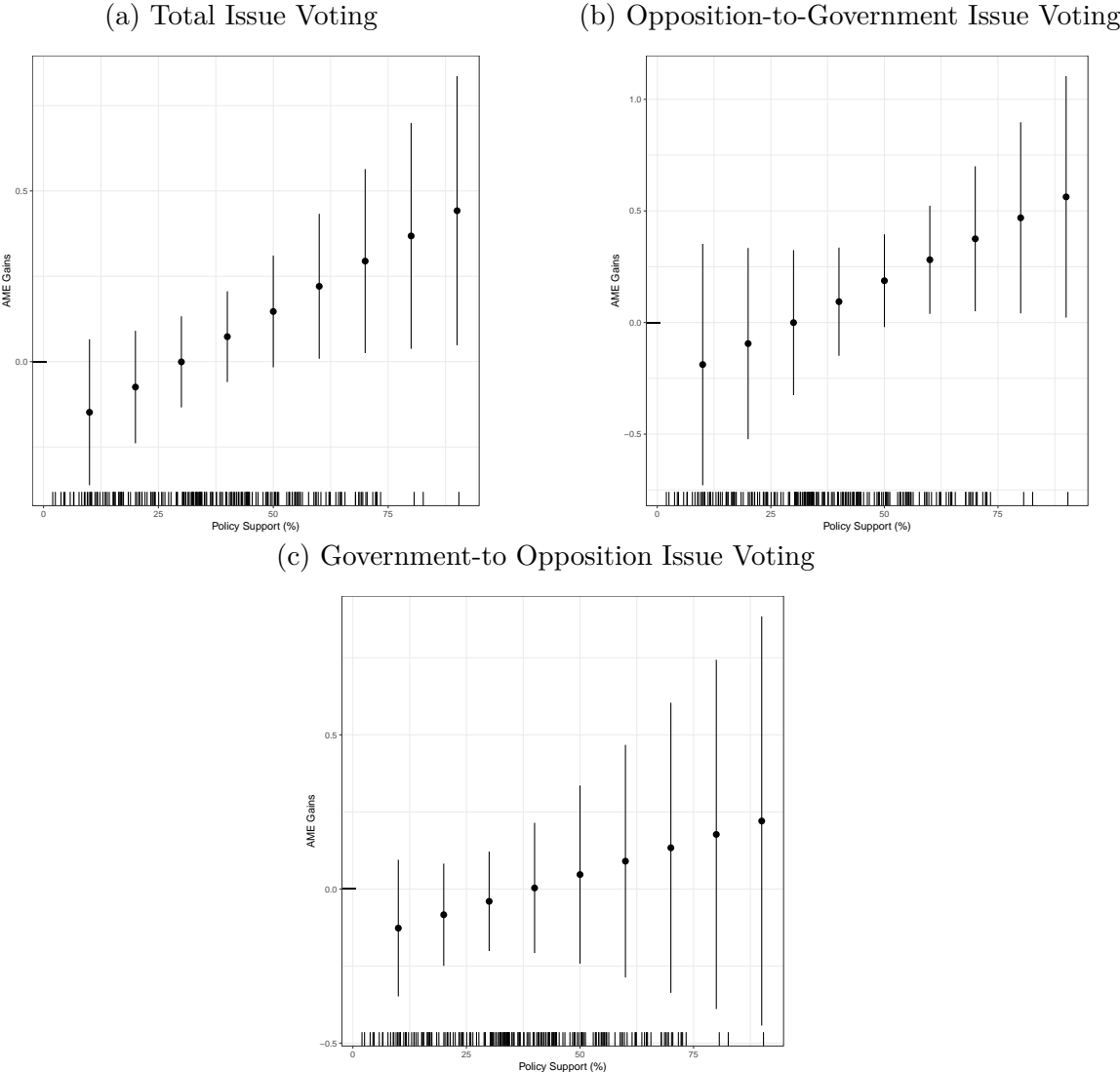
Are Government Parties just Representing their Supporters?

One possibility is that parties in government are not responding to issue voting but instead are representing the preferences of their supporters. To test this possibility, we repeated our analysis of the impact of opposition-to-government issue voting on the representation of the preferences of supporters of parties that made it into government.

Figure 5 shows the marginal effects of issue voting at various levels of support for policy change among government-party voters (coefficients are in Section 8 of the Online Appendix). The rug plots show the distribution of support for policy changes among government-party supporters. We can see evidence that total issue voting and opposition-to-government issue voting mattered to policy representation even among government-party supporters. The marginal effect of both types of issue voting is significant when 60% or more of government supporters favor a change. It is not surprising that issue voting matters among government-party supporters at a higher level of support for a policy change than among the rest of voters, because government-party supporters support popular policies their governments adopt more than voters overall (see distributions in Section 9 of the Online Appendix). Thus, governing

parties do not always represent their supporters' preferences. They do so when their voting behavior gives them an incentive to implement their preferred policies.

Figure 5: Types of Issue Voting and the Representation of the Preferences of Government Party Supporters



The measures of support for government parties used here are from the pre-election surveys. We ran similar models with support for policy change among government-party supporters from the post-election studies and results are similar (see Section 10 of Online Appendix).

Considering Other Possible Explanations

An important alternative explanation to consider is that issue voting matters for representation but only because it allows citizens to get governments that represent their preferences. Rather than governing parties caring about implementing policies that won them votes in the previous election, they may simply implement popular policies because governments supporting popular positions replace governments with unpopular positions. This is the electoral turnover (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995) or mandate (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes 1999) mechanism of policy representation, discussed in the literature.

Government turnover is clearly associated with the implementation of popular policies. While a mere four per cent of policies with majority support were implemented by re-elected incumbents, half of the popular policies were implemented by new governments. However, that does not mean that issue voting is any less important. When a new government was formed, seventy-five per cent of popular policies with significant opposition-to-government issue voting were implemented. Conversely, under a new government, only 42 per cent of issue proposals with majority support but no opposition-to-government issue voting were implemented. Opposition-to-government issue voting nearly doubles the proportion of popular policies that are implemented. There was no evidence of that type of issue voting on proposals with majority support when the incumbent returned to power, suggesting that government turnover occurs when parties or a coalition of parties campaign on a popular issue and gain support as a result.¹⁵

There is some weak evidence though that issue voting matters to policy representation

¹⁵Section 11 of the Online Appendix shows the scatter-plots of public support and issue voting for incumbent and non-incumbent governments. They show that, while new governments are more likely to gain support among supporters of a popular policy position, incumbent governments are more likely to lose support among supporters of unpopular policies. Government turnover thus appears to occur when a non-incumbent identifies a popular policy that matters to voters.

even in the absence of government turnover. If we consider issues with support above 45 percent, we find evidence that opposition-to-government issue voting matters. Twenty-five per cent of such issue proposals were implemented when there was significant opposition-to-government issue voting, compared to 13.8 per cent when there was no such significant issue voting. Admittedly, this evidence that issue voting matters under re-elected incumbents is weaker, but it does suggest that it, nonetheless, makes a difference.

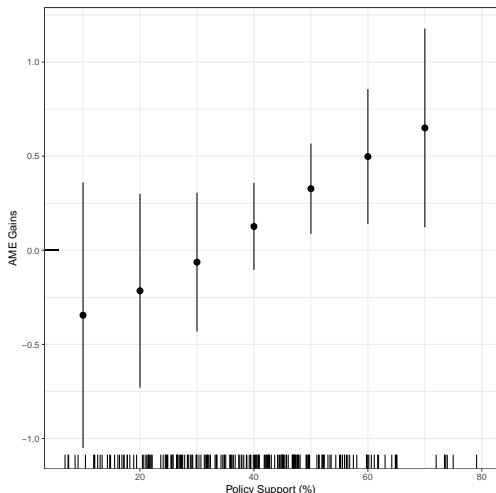
A final possible alternative explanation is that what matters for representation is not the existence of issue voting but instead the intensity of preferences. Issue voting may be more common when citizens have more strongly-held preferences and governments may care more about public opinion when preferences are more strongly held. For most of the issues for which we have data, the questions that were asked allowed citizens to express their degree of support or opposition to a policy change. Thus, to rule out this possibility, we create an aggregate measure of the intensity of preferences for each issue and include it as a control variable in models of policy implementation.

For all issues for which respondents could indicate the intensity of their preferences, we calculate the mean absolute value of the intensity of preferences across all respondents. Higher values thus indicate a stronger intensity of preferences on average. We then replicate the model of policy implementation testing the conditioning effect of opposition-to-government issue voting on the influence of public opinion on policy. However, we add the measure of preference intensity as well as an interaction between that variable and the public support variable. The first panel of Figure 6 shows marginal effects of opposition-to-government issue voting at various levels of public support for policy changes. We can see that marginal effects are similar to those in Figure 4(b), which shows analogous effects without controlling for intensity. The second panel shows the marginal effects of preference intensity on the implementation of policy proposals. As we can see, preference intensity actually has a negative marginal effect on implementation controlling for opposition-to-government issue voting at most levels of public support. Thus, the increasing responsiveness to pub-

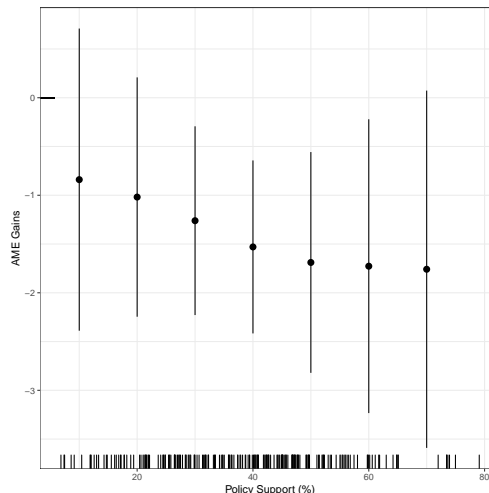
lic opinion that results from opposition-to-government issue voting is not due to a greater intensity of preferences.

Figure 6: Model of Policy Implementation Including Preference Intensity

(a) Opposition-to-Government Issue Voting



(b) Intensity



Before concluding, we should address some final concerns. We have focused on the impact of policy preferences and issue voting during election campaigns on policy implementation at any point during a government’s term. However, policy preferences may change over time and the issues motivating party preferences may change over time. Parties should, therefore, consider issue voting and policy preferences less as time goes by. We would, therefore, expect issue voting to matter most early in government’s terms. We, therefore, consider the implementation of policies in each year following an election in Section 12 of the Online Appendix. We find that most of the impact of issue voting occurs during the first two years following an election.¹⁶

Finally, readers may be curious how much our findings can be generalized to other contexts. Sweden is particular for several reasons. Two important distinctions relate to its governments. Social Democratic governments have governed most of the time since univer-

¹⁶We also show that our results are not due to disproportionate influence by particular issues in Section 13 of the Online Appendix.

sal suffrage was introduced. The Social Democrats governed following 10 of the 15 elections covered by this paper. Moreover, Sweden has had an abundance of minority governments (including 11 of the 15 governments covered by this paper). Do these distinctive characteristics of Swedish governments account for our findings? While it is difficult to know how well our findings generalize elsewhere without actually carrying out similar studies in other contexts, we attempted to control for these particularities of Swedish governments by adding them to regression models similar to those presented above. The results, presented in Sections 14 and 15 of the Online Appendix, show that our findings hold up even with these controls.

Conclusion

Our analyses have shown that, contrary to recent work on democratic politics, elections do frequently lead to policy representation by government. We have seen that, issue voting does occur during election campaigns. However, it is extremely variable. Some issues matter a great deal to vote choice, while others have little influence.

We also saw that issue voting influences policy representation. When citizens who support a policy change shift their vote choice towards parties that end up in government, those parties take notice and are more likely to implement popular policies than when citizens do not engage in that form of issue voting. These findings show that it is not enough for the public simply to support a policy change for that change to be implemented. Enough people have to consider an issue sufficiently important to shift their votes towards governing parties. Our findings thus supports the conventional perspective on representation according to which government parties implement citizens' preferences in order to be re-elected. However, it modifies that model by showing that citizens only provide governments an incentive to represent them on certain issues. Thus, even government parties seeking re-election are not entirely constrained by public opinion.

When thinking about the functioning of democracy, we should consider how citizens behave politically and we should also consider the incentives citizens' behavior creates for political elites. Even if people engage in biased information processing, they are sometimes biased in favor of their policy preferences rather than in favor of a party (Mullinix 2016). When that is the case and when such biased policy-oriented reasoning leads voters to shift their votes towards parties that enter government, those parties have an incentive to implement those preferences. Consequently, we believe there are grounds for optimism about the functioning of democracy.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that connects voting behavior by citizens to representation by government. We have brought together the prudent approach to assessing issue voting advocated by Lenz (2012) and the approach to the study of policy representation used by Gilens (2012) and Lax and Phillips (2012).

We have shown that what should give governments the greatest incentive to represent people's preferences, changes in electoral behavior resulting from issue preferences, strongly conditions representation. We have focused on the Swedish context where high quality data are available. In order to better understand how well modern democracies function, scholars should adopt our approach to analyze representation in other contexts and determine whether voters elsewhere consider policy when they vote and crucially whether their concern for policy on election day makes governments follow their preferences.

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