

YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE?

AN INQUIRY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEALTHCARE QUALITY, ISSUE SALIENCE AND GOVERNMENT POPULARITY



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Abstract

The following thesis investigates the moderation effects of issue salience on the relationship between retrospective evaluations of governments' healthcare as well as economy policies performance and government popularity. Its core hypothesis postulates that voters are more likely to reward incumbents with reelection if they pursue successful policies, as well as more likely sanction them with defection to opposition, if their policies fail for issues they consider to be salient. The thesis runs two separate studies using different measurements of the same theoretical concepts to check for robustness of results. The first study is based on individual-level data, while the second study employs macro-level data. Results of the first study suggest, that voters are more likely to *reward* incumbents for improving healthcare standards when healthcare-related issues are salient, but not more likely to *sanction* incumbents for worsening healthcare standards. Contrary to expectations, voters who are of the view that economic issues are salient, seem to be more likely to support incumbents when national economic conditions are regressing. For Study 2, the thesis found no significant effect – objective indicators of economic and healthcare quality performance as well as measures of economy and healthcare-related issues on a macro-level seem to be unrelated to government popularity, though data validity is suspected to play an important part in the outcome of the regressions of Study 1.

I. Introduction

The norm of political accountability is often regarded to be one of the defining normative components of representative democracy (Strøm, 2000). It embodies the idea that the public should sanction elected officials who are out of tune with the public will and interest, and thereby exercise citizen control over politicians.¹ Democratic theorists have long recognized that one of the most conventional ways citizens can practice this norm, is to retrospectively assess government activity and hold incumbents liable for the performance of their policies at voting booths (Anderson, 2007, p. 273; Burgett & Kogan, 2016, p. 302; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020, p. 100). Within this framework of accountability, voters are expected to either reward incumbents with reelection or punish them with defection to opposition, depending on their achievements during their tenure.

Beyond its normative desirability in democracies, this reward-punishment mechanism has, particularly for economic affairs, instilled itself as an empirical fact in the scholarly as well as popular discourse (Anderson, 2007, p. 271). It is from this viewpoint perhaps not surprising that the standard practice in the retrospective voting literature so far, has been to assume the performance of economic policy to be one of the primary concerns of voters (Singer, 2011). The notion that economic management takes precedence over other issues in electoral politics has attained an almost axiomatic status in the literature.

Yet, recent evidence indicates that economic performance has a highly inconsistent effect on electoral choice (Anderson, 2007; Paldam, 1991). Several studies of economic voting interpreted these results as an indication that democratic accountability is the exception rather than the rule (Anderson, 2007, p. 276; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020, p. 100). After all, it would seem unlikely that incumbents would be held accountable for policy performance outside of the economy, if voters frequently failed at sanctioning them in what is presumed to be the electorally most important

¹ The central role devoted to the relation between accountability and citizens in exercising this norm is also reflected in the numerous definitions of democracy. Schmitter and Karl's definition provides one such example as they write that "[m]odern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation" (1991, p. 76). Schumpeter's notion of democracy can also be interpreted in a similar light – for him, "[d]emocracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them" (1942, p. 284-285).

domain of government activity. However, drawing such a conclusion may be premature. It has been demonstrated that voters' electoral priorities often lie outside of the economy and oscillate between a variety of issues, which raises the question of whether issue salience has a moderating effect on the relationship between the electoral success of governments and their policy performance (Singer, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to investigate this proposition and answer the following research question: *"To what extent and under what conditions does the salience of issues in a given policy domain enhance the electoral responses to governments' policy performance within that domain?"*.

Next to the effects of the economy as a point of reference, the paper incorporates measures of healthcare standards in combination with healthcare-related issue salience in the analysis of governing parties' electoral success. With the exception of a handful of studies, the influence of healthcare policy on electoral outcomes has largely been neglected by empirical research (Hobolt, et al. 2013; Johnston & Pattie, 2001; Konisky & Richardson, 2012). In comparison, economic performance has received a considerable portion of attention by political scientists who research determinants of electoral choice, even though healthcare policy is, after economic performance, the second most frequently cited political issue across numerous electoral contexts, at least according to the second wave of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (2001-2006). Compared to 46% of respondents who reported economic performance to be the most important issue of their country, 16% replied with healthcare-related issues (Singer, 2011, p. 292).² In view of this, healthcare policy performance is an appropriate policy domain to investigate the electoral effect of issues salience.

An extensive debate in the literature on retrospective voting deals with operationalizations of key theoretical concepts, offering a wide range of alternative measurements for identical concepts (see Data collection, Operationalization and Methodology section). By making use of these alternatives, the paper investigates the effects of issue salience, conducting two separate

² Besides economic issues, healthcare-related issues were the only category of issues that exceeded a 10% threshold in saliency.

studies that serve to check for the robustness of results. Study 1 is based on individual-level data, whereas Study 2 employs macro-level data.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, the paper lays out an overview of the literature, identifying theoretical gaps within the current state of the research and proceeds to present the core hypotheses. In the second section, the paper discusses data collection strategies and elaborates the choice of statistical methodologies for each study. Next, the paper describes strategies of case selection used for each study and follows up by illustrating outcomes of the statistical tests. In the final section, the paper summarizes main findings and concludes with a discussion.

II. Theory

Retrospective voting to date

The link between policy performance and government popularity has been in the research agenda of political scientists for over half a century. In terms of numbers, publications dealing with the electoral effects of economic performance have to a large extent dominated the field (Bochsler & Hänni, 2019; Fiorina, 1978; Healy & Malhotra, 2013; Kramer, 1971; Key, 1966). Much of the economic voting literature has been motivated by the view that the well-being of the economy is the electorates' first and foremost priority when voting. After all, the economy is one of, if not, the most talked-about topic during election season (Anderson, 1995) and has a direct effect on the livelihood of citizens (Singer, 2011, p. 287). It has also been argued that voters care more for economic management, as information about economic indices is more accessible and easier to process than, for instance, regulation policies on biotechnology (Anderson, 2007, p. 277). A considerable number of scholars have come to recognize the notion that voter choice is dependent on how well elected officials manage the economy as a stylized empirical fact (Anderson, 2007). This is perhaps nowhere better articulated than in Tufte's quote: "When you think economics, think elections; when you think elections, think economics" (1978, p. 65).

Taken as a whole, evidence suggests that economic performance has a positive, albeit highly inconsistent effect on electoral outcomes for different countries and periods (Anderson, 2007; Paldam, 1991). Thus, and in contrast to the prevalent notion, these findings have highlighted that governments can indeed frequently escape electoral punishment for economic downturns. In response to these observations, a myriad of subsequent studies has disputed the proposition of a direct link between government performance and popularity, and advanced more sophisticated models of retrospective voting that move beyond the traditional version of the reward-punishment hypothesis. Some of these studies have integrated the electoral effects of complex institutional structures into the theoretical scheme of the reward-punishment mechanism and shown that certain structures (e.g. coalitions) obscure lines of political responsibility for the political decision-making and policy formulation processes, impeding voters from holding the proper actors accountable (Anderson, 2000; Anderson, 2007; Bengtsson, 2004; Duch, 2001; Hobolt et al. 2013; Nadeau et al. 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Another line of studies has linked heterogeneity in economic voting to voter heterogeneity and explored behavioral differences in how voters with different prior biases process and interpret information to evaluate government performance (de Vries & Giger, 2014; Gomez & Wilson, 2006; Marsh & Tilley, 2009).

What has largely escaped the attention of the literature dealing with observed inconsistencies in economic voting, is the role of issue salience. The notion that the well-being of the economy takes precedence over other government responsibilities has served as one of the pivotal assumptions as to why voters would weigh economic performance more heavily in their party preferences than performance in other policy domains. It is by now a fairly well-documented fact however, that economic issues are not at the forefront of electorates' agendas during every election season, ultimately undermining this central assumption of economic voting models (Singer, 2011). These findings provoke the question of whether voters are more inclined to hold incumbents liable for policy performance in domains with issues they consider salient. Before dealing with this

question however, I turn my attention to the the concept of issue salience and how it intersects with retrospective voting theory.

Issue voting and retrospective voting

Issue salience is a frequently used, but seldomly spelled out concept in political science that has a variety of interrelated meanings (Wlezien, 2005, p. 557). According to one interpretation of the concept, issue salience can be defined by the amount of attention an issue receives (e.g. Kleinnijenhuis & de Ridder, 1998). An alternative definition of issue salience is based on the extent to which an issue poses an active problem (Wlezien, 2005). However, when using the term, most political scientists refer to the importance attached to political issues (Wlezien, 2005, p. 558). Following this common usage of the term, an issue can be labeled as salient if it ranks higher in importance than a collection of other issues, which is also how the term is understood here.

Why would issue salience enhance electoral responses to specific policy performance? Political psychologists have already pointed out that salient issues, irrespective of the policy domain they relate to, are cognitively more accessible and "therefore more likely to come to mind as a criterion with which to evaluate political candidates" (Krosnick, 1990, p. 62). Furthermore, investigations found that citizens tend to seek information on, and have a better understanding of issues they regard to be important, regardless of whether it is foreign policy, social policy or economic policy (Fournier et al., 2003, p. 53). Beyond these indications, it is almost intuitive to assume that the government's policy track record has a heavier weight in the vote preferences of the electorate in policy domains with salient issues than non-salient issues. After all, there is a universe of policy performance domains to consider when voting, but only one vote to cast, meaning that voters will inevitably have to weigh different policy domains in relation to each other when forming an opinion about government performance. However, due to cognitive limits "on the amount of information [individuals] can process simultaneously" (Singer, 2011, p. 286), and also by virtue of

the fact that obtaining political information entails opportunity costs (Downs, 1957), voters are most of the time only able to retrieve information on a select few policy domains and thereby only consider policy performance in those select few policy domains when voting.

Up until now, most research on retrospective voting presented reasoned views on which policy domains have salient issues attached to them. Which issues are salient and which are not is presumably not dependent on reasonable views and arguments however, but on empirical conditions and circumstances. At the most basic level, individual voters may prioritize certain issues over others due to their belief system or personal preferences (Singer, 2011, 286). On a macro-level, communication studies have demonstrated that media priming, a strategy for steering public attention to certain issues over others by reporting on them more excessively, may also influence issues that are considered to be important indirectly (Fournier, et al. p. 52). Agenda-setting strategies of political actors can be mentioned as a third cause of issue salience. By putting certain issues on the "radar", political actors can raise public awareness for certain issues, and thereby turn some issues salient (Fournier, et al. p. 52).

This paper investigates whether healthcare quality as well as economic performance has a greater effect on election outcomes when economy- and healthcare-related issues are salient. Healthcare remains a policy area that has not been studied extensively in relation to retrospective voting. One of the exceptions is a study conducted by Johnston & Pattie (2001), who use indicators of government performance for nine policy areas, including the quality of healthcare services to test the classical reward-punishment hypothesis for the British case, reporting positive results: higher healthcare quality increase electoral support of incumbents and vice versa. The Obama administration's healthcare reform in the United States seems to have affected the 2010 Congress elections in a similar manner (Konisky & Richardson, 2012). Hobolt et al. (2013) have also researched the effect of healthcare performance on vote choice on a larger scope, including all

member states of the European Union (EU). Their findings suggest, that healthcare performance has a substantial impact on the electoral success of governments. Considering the findings of prior research, there are definitely indications which signal a direct relationship between improving healthcare standards and electoral support of incumbents. In view of these points, the three central hypotheses of the paper can be formulated as follows:

1. Healthcare voting hypothesis: If healthcare quality decreases, the electoral support of incumbents decrease in the consecutive election and vice versa.
2. Healthcare issue voting hypothesis: Citizens who consider healthcare-related issues to be salient are, compared to those who do not, more likely to reward incumbents if healthcare standards improve and more likely to punish them if they decline.
3. Economy issue voting hypothesis: Citizens who consider economy-related issues to be salient are, compared to those who do not, more likely to reward incumbents if economic performance improves and more likely to punish them if it decline.

III. Data collection, Operationalization and Methodology

There have been several debates in the retrospective voting literature on how to operationalize key concepts, particularly on whether government popularity should be measured on the basis of approval rates, shifts in voter share of incumbents or vote intentions (Anderson, 2007, p. 274); whether citizens put more weight on the national performance (sociotropic voting) or their own well-being (pocketbook/egocentric voting) when casting their ballot (Echegaray, 2005; Kinder & Kiwiet, 1981); whether objective or perceived policy performance is a more appropriate predictor of electoral outcomes (Anderson, 2007, p. 274); and how different indicators of policy performance (e.g. inflation rate, growth rate, unemployment level for the economy) affect these outcomes (Dorussen & Taylor, 2002; Hibbs & Vasilatos, 1982). Rather than taking a position in these debates, the present paper incorporates different measurements of the same theoretical concepts and

conducts two separate studies that function as robustness tests. Study 1 employs individual-level data provided by the 2009 module of the European Election Studies (EES), while Study 2 exclusively contains macro-level data derived from a multitude of sources.

Study 1

The EES collects cross-national survey data for all member states of the EU. Its 2009 module provides well-suited data to test the theoretical propositions of this paper, since it allows to investigate the moderation effects of issue salience on incumbent popularity in combination with retrospective evaluations of national economic conditions and healthcare standards at an individual level.

Nonetheless, one important shortcoming of the dataset should be addressed. While the survey questionnaire includes items on egocentric as well as sociotropic evaluations of economic conditions, the module presents a single measure of healthcare standards that is exclusively based on respondents' general impressions for their respective countries. Some scholars have noted that this sociotropic-egocentric voting distinction is less insightful for policy areas outside the economy, arguing that the personal well-being of citizens frequently overlaps with conditions on the national scale, as is the case for defense or environmental policy (de Vries & Giger, 2014, p. 351). For evaluations of healthcare standards, the distinction is arguably still sensible however, as there presumably exists a discrepancy in perceptions of national and personal healthcare standards that is correlated with the comprehensiveness of a person's healthcare insurance. In consideration of this, it could have been valuable to include egocentric evaluations of healthcare standards as an additional robustness check in the analysis, had it been a part of the questionnaire.

The dependent variable of Study 1 is a measure of respondents' vote intention for subsequent national elections. Following standard practice in the retrospective voting literature, I transformed the measure into a dichotomous variable distinguishing between governing (code 1) and opposition

parties (code 0) (Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020, p. 105). Approximately two-thirds of the total respondents intended to vote for opposition parties, compared to the one-third who was planning to cast their vote in favor of incumbents.

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable, I employed a binary logistic model as the method of statistical analysis. Binary logistic regression models estimate the probability of a specific outcome for binary variables (e.g. response – yes/no; vote intention – government/opposition) and are therefore an appropriate statistical method for Study 1. Across all models, I set the reference category of the dependent variable to voters intending to support opposition parties, so that the models would estimate the probability of supporting incumbents.

The main independent variables of the study are measures of economic performance and healthcare standards as well as the political salience of economic and healthcare-related issues. In line with the classic reward-punishment model, I expected that voters would punish incumbents if they found the national economic conditions to have declined or healthcare standards to have degenerated and vice versa. In order to test this, I used reported perceptions on the national economic performance and healthcare standards. The survey gathered data on this by asking respondents the following questions:

"What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think the general economic situation in [country] has gotten a lot better, a little better, has stayed the same, has got a little worse, or has got a lot worse?"

"And over the last 12 months, has the standard of health care in [country] got a lot better, a little better, stayed the same, got a little worse or got a lot worse?"

Values of both variables range from 0 to 5. I recoded the variables, so that 5 denotes "a lot better" and 0 denotes "a lot worse".

Despite a wide range of alternative operationalizations, the most frequently used indicator of issue salience in empirical research remains survey respondents' views on the most important issues (Wlezien, 2005, p. 556-557). In line with this standard method of operationalization, I employed

responses to the question "What do you think is the [first, second, third] most important problem facing [country] today?" as the measure of issue salience. In its original form, the variable consisted of several dozen item categories, ranging from healthcare to environmental and animal rights issues. I transformed the variable into two separate dummy variables, each of which respectively captures respondents' stance toward the importance of economy and healthcare-related issues, with 0 denoting that they view them to be unimportant and 1 denoting that they consider them to be important. While approximately 14% of respondents mentioned healthcare issues as one of the three most important national problems, 33% of respondents included economic issues in their response to the question. In order to investigate the electoral effect of the interplay between issue salience and performance evaluation, I computed two interaction terms using economy and healthcare standards evaluations with their respective dummy variables of issue salience.

Moreover, I incorporated a measurement of ideological distance to the government based on the ideological left-right self-placement of the respondent and their left-right placement of governing parties as a control variable in the analysis. Models of voter heterogeneity associate ideological proximity to the government with a selective attitude in regards to assigning responsibility for policy failures that predisposes voters to favor ideologically closer incumbents (see Theory section). Values of both variables range from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). In order to measure respondents' ideological distance to the government, I subtracted values of the ideological self-placement variable from the values of ideological placement of the government. According to this computation, a person, who considers themselves to be radically right-wing and the government to be composed of radically left-wing parties, would have a -10 unit distance to the government, while in the reversed case, a person would be 10 units away from the government. Since the value expresses the same distance, irrespective of its sign, I transposed negative values into their positive counterparts. The resulting variable has a range between 0 (ideologically identical to the government) and 10 (ideologically distant to the government).

Study 2

The dataset for the second study contains measures of government popularity, healthcare services quality, economic performance and salience of economy as well as healthcare-related issues at a macro-level. I derived data for these measures from a variety of sources, since no single dataset included data on all relevant variables.

The dependent variable for Study 2 is a measure of government parties' shift in vote share between two consecutive election cycles. Formally, this measure can be expressed as:

$$\text{Government popularity shift} = \sum X_{(y,i+1)} - X_{(y,i)}$$

, where X=vote share of government party y and i=election cycle. I retrieved necessary figures on election outcomes from Adam Carr's Election Archive and calculated shifts in government popularity according to the formula above. On average, governments lost 8 percentage points in vote share after every subsequent election. Some aspects of the measurement require additional explanation. First of all, the measure aggregates the vote share of all acting parties, meaning that vote share of coalition participants is also included in the measurement. More recently, empirical investigations have called this standard method of measuring government popularity into question and advanced the idea that voters rarely hold the government as a whole accountable, instead blaming select members of coalitions for the government's policy track record. Findings suggest that the head of government's party is on average more likely to incur electoral losses than other coalition participants (Debus et al., 2014; Fisher & Hobolt, 2010). Having said that, others have pointed out that the difference in electoral losses is primarily due to the discrepancy in vote share, as larger parties carry a higher risk of losing voters than small parties, simply due to their size (Hjermitslev, 2020, p. 517). Additionally, evidence indicates that coalition members generally share a similar electoral fate for their economic policy record when controlling for party size, not only in terms of winning or losing votes, but also in regards to relative levels of change in popularity

(Hjermitslev, 2020, p. 517-518). Hence, junior coalition members cannot be considered to be exempt from being held accountable and are therefore included in the measurement of the dependent variable. Second, the measure applies for the last partisan government that was last in power for at least six months without interruption and therefore excludes caretaker as well as short-lived governments. I expected that voters would be less inclined to retrospectively assess policy performance of nonpartisan or frequently dissolving governments, as the former would be unable to formulate and implement long term policies that could be retrospectively assessed, while the latter is by definition an interim government that would be replaced by another, irrespective of its policy performance. With the dependent variable of Study 2 as a continuous variable, I chose a standard ordinary least squares regression (OLS) regression analysis as the method of statistical analysis.

Measures of healthcare services quality for Study 2 were retrieved from the Institutional Profiles Database (IPD). The IPD is a joint project between the Economic Services Department of the Ministry for the Economy and Finance (MEF) of France, the French Development Agency (AFD), the Centre d'Études Prospectives et d'Informations Internationales (CEPII), and Maastricht Graduate School of Governance that aims to measure different dimensions of governance. Values for the quality of healthcare services specifically were based on assessments of officials and country experts in the AFD and MEF and range from 0 to 4. Taking a comparative view, Roca (2012) finds that the evaluations of the IPD are generally consistent with governance indicators of other databases (e.g. the World Bank's World Governance Index) and can therefore be regarded to be reliable. Nonetheless, he also notes that for some indicators evaluations of the IPD deviates from alternative governance indicators and suggests that the difference reflects a French and Anglo-Saxon bias respectively that is most starkly reflected in the evaluations of former French colonies. Since none of the former colonial states of France were included in the analysis, the difference between indicators should not be reflected in the data set. In accordance with standard economic voting models (Reed & Cho, 1998), I assumed that voters would compare their current quality of

healthcare services to those before the election cycle to evaluate incumbent performance. Based on this assumption, I computed shifts in the quality of healthcare services according to the following formula:

$$\text{Healthcare quality shift} = X_{(z)} - X_{(i)}$$

, where X_{i} = healthcare quality for the year in which the previous election was held and X_z = healthcare quality for the year before the current elections.³

Moving on, I measured economic performance by calculating relative changes in the gross domestic product (GDP) of countries between two election cycles and obtained relevant data from the World Bank Group. The GDP is a rough estimate of total monetary value that exists within a country and is frequently used as an indicator of economic performance in the retrospective voting literature. In order to remove the artificial bolstering effects of currency devaluation and revaluation on GDP, I employed data for the GDP measured in US dollars, since it experienced less value fluctuations compared to other internationally used currencies during the time frame. I computed the measure by dividing the GDP value for the year leading up to elections by the GDP value during the last elections, which gives the relative change in economic performance. The mean rate of economic growth between two elections was around 9%.

As a proxy of issue salience, I drew on data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). The CMP extracts quasi-sentences within a party's manifesto according to a prespecified code (e.g. favorable mentions of military expenditure, negative mentions of protectionism) and calculates the proportions of quasi-sentences between different codes of the same overarching category. To measure the salience of economic and healthcare-related issues, I used favorable mentions of economic growth and welfare expansion respectively. Political scientists have previously described indicators of the data set as measures of *issue emphasis* rather than issue salience, since the CMP primarily quantifies textual references to specific issues in manifestos without incorporating the

³ The IPD does not publish data annually. If measurements of healthcare quality for the specified year was not available, I used data for the chronologically closest year before elections were held.

degree to which these issues are considered salient within a population (Rovny, 2012, p. 278; Spoon & Klüver, 2014, p. 53). For this reason, I weighted party values in the selected variables by their voter share and calculated the national average for each country included in Study 2.

An extensive line of research employs manifesto data as a substitute for direct measures of issue salience (Dolezal et al., 2018, p. 240). Cross-data analyses indicate that manifesto data strongly correlates with alternative operationalizations of issue salience such as expert evaluations and mass surveys, and hence can be considered to be an appropriate indicator of issue salience (Heibling & Tresh, 2011, p. 180). That being said, there are serious caveats associated with using the CMP data set which need to be addressed. First, the indicator of healthcare issue salience in the CMP is part of an aggregated index that measures favorable mentions of welfare policy expansions, and thus includes other dimensions of welfare, such as education or social policy. As a result, the variable cannot be considered to accurately represent salience of healthcare-related issues, increasing the odds of having biased estimates. Second, although manifesto values of parties are multiplied with their respective vote share to include the degree to which economy and healthcare-related issues are considered salient by the electorate, a party's vote share is not necessarily related to the content of their manifesto, ultimately reducing the validity of the data. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that parties often deliberately engage in strategies to emphasize and blur specific issues, including in their party manifestos (Rovny, 2012), leading to a lower reliability of the data. With these caveats of the CMP in consideration, the results of Study 2 should be taken with a grain of salt and interpreted cautiously.

Lastly, I included the presence of coalition governments as a control for Study 2. Findings of previous investigations suggest that coalitions obscure lines of responsibility and thereby impede voters from holding the proper actors, resulting in coalition governments incurring less vote losses than other types of government (see Theory section). The variable was incorporated as a dummy, where 1 denotes the presence of a coalition government and 0 of a non-coalition government.

IV. Case Selection

Study 1

The 2009 wave of the EES for Study 1 covers all of the then 27 EU countries and includes approximately 1000 interviews per country, adding up to a total sample size of 27069.

The objective of the survey developers was to randomize participant selection using a two-stage process. In the first stage, questioners drew and contacted a random sample of households by stochastically generating telephone numbers, a sampling procedure also known as the random-digit dialing method (RDD). Afterwards, questioners requested the person who last had their birthday in the household to fill out the standardized questionnaire. The last-birthday method is designed to quasi-randomly select participants of a study within a single household and is often employed in conjunction with the RDD. Interviewing the first person to pick up telephone calls would likely lead to biased samples, since the probability of answering house calls is contingent on factors such as time spent in the house which is arguably unequal between different household members, whereas the probability of a person to last have their birthday is more or less equal across all members of a household. Accordingly, the last-birthday method can be considered to randomize participant selection within a household. With these rigorous methods of participant selection, the EES is likely to have a random sample and thereby reduce self-selection or sampling error issues – two frequent problems of mass survey data (Dillmann et al. 2014, p. 202-204).

Study 2

For Study 2 the data set includes a total of 99 election cycles for 41 countries between 2006 and 2019 around numerous regions of the world: Europe (28); Middle East (1); Asia (6); North America (2); Latin America (2) and Oceania (2). The geographically dispersed selection of cases for Study 2 guarantees diversity of cases and thereby aims to be representative of the population, while the at

the same time including data on all the EU member states of Study 1 for comparability purposes /while the sample at the same time includes data on all EU member states of Study 1 for comparability purposes. The choice of the time frame is mainly due to the availability of the data, as most sources of data span from mid 2000s to late 2010s.

In addition to the availability of case specific data, countries at a bare minimum also require a stable electoral system included in the analysis of Study 2. The presence of a stable electoral regime is often regarded to be one of the minimal conditions to qualify as a democratic regime (Przeworski 1999). If the electoral regime of a country is fragile, official election figures of the government cannot be assumed to reflect the real electoral support of the government. Including cases with unstable electoral regimes would therefore lead to biased estimates of the independent variables. To omit non-democratic regimes, countries with a lower value of 0.5 in the electoral democracy variable provided by V-Dem are excluded from the sample. The threshold is based on a regime typology that was constructed using V-Dem data, according to which countries with a lower electoral democracy score qualify as "electoral autocracies" and those above as "electoral democracies" (Lührmann, et al. 2018).⁴ Table 1 illustrates all cases included in the analysis.

Table 1. Overview of cases.

Country	Time frame – Study 1	Time frame – Study 2
Australia	2006-2016	2009
Austria	2008-2017	2009
Belgium	2006-2019	2009
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2006-2018	-
Bulgaria	2006-2017	2009
Canada	2006-2019	-
Chile	2009-2017	-
Cyprus	2011-2016	2009

⁴ The following cases were excluded from the analysis due having a value of electoral democracy lower than 0.5: Philippines (2004-2010); Turkey (2015-2018); Ukraine (2012-2014; 2014-2019)

Czech Republic	2006-2017	2009
Denmark	2006-2019	2009
Estonia	2006-2015	2009
Finland	2007-2015	2009
France	2006-2013	2009
Germany	2006-2017	2009
Greece	2006-2019	2009
Hungary	2006-2010	2009
India	2009-2019	-
Indonesia	2009-2019	-
Ireland	2007-2016	2009
Israel	2006-2019	-
Italy	2006-2018	2009
Japan	2006-2017	-
Latvia	2010-2018	2009
Lithuania	2006-2016	2009
Luxembourg	⁵	2009
Mexico	2006-2018	-
Netherlands	2006-2017	2009
New Zealand	2008-2017	-
Peru	2006-2016	-
Philippines	2010-2016	-
Poland	2006-2015	2009
Portugal	2007-2019	2009
Romania	2006-2016	2009
Slovakia	2010-2016	2009
Slovenia	2011-2018	2009
South Korea	2006-2012	-
Spain	2006-2015	2009
Sweden	2010-2018	2009
Taiwan	2008-2016	-
Turkey	2006-2015	-
Ukraine	2007-2012	-

⁵ Luxembourg was omitted from the first study, since data on its healthcare quality was unavailable.

V. Results

The results of the binary logistic and OLS regression are reported in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. Model 1 of each study exclusively considers the main variables of interest, while Model 2 also controls for variables that the literature previously identified to affect retrospective voting. Both tables also include several robustness tests to reinforce outcomes of the regressions. These include country controls (Model 3), time dependency controls (Model 4), and either (Model 5). As Study 1 is conducted using static data, controls for time dependency were limited to Study 2, which is based on panel data.

Study 1

As expected, perceptions on the changes of healthcare standards seem to have a significant effect on individual vote intentions. In comparison to respondents who are of the opinion that healthcare standards are in a lot worse condition than before, those who found that healthcare standards have dropped a little, remained the same, improved a little and improved a lot are more likely to support governing parties across virtually all models. Moreover, regression outcomes of Model 3 highlight that the effect is not confined to specific countries, but present in the majority of countries of the sample, as the mentioned model includes country controls. All in all, results of Table 2 seem to corroborate the *healthcare voting* hypothesis.

The same conclusion can be drawn for the classic *economic voting* hypothesis. Compared to those who have observed that national economic performance has become a lot worse, respondents who felt that it became slightly worse, did not change, slightly improved and improved substantially have been more likely to express vote intention in favor of governing parties across all model. Hence, the analyses reinforce prior expectations derived from the traditional reward-punishment hypothesis.

Table 2. Binary logistic regression results on government support (Study 1).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-1.198*** (0.063)	-0.143*** (0.082)	1.375*** (0.179)
Retrospective perception of changes in healthcare standards (ref.=A lot worse)			
A little worse	0.147** (0.075)	0.035 (0.089)	-0.113 (0.096)
Stayed the same	0.322*** (0.068)	0.273*** (0.082)	0.129 (0.089)
A little better	0.448*** (0.089)	0.439*** (0.108)	0.420*** (0.118)
A lot better	0.276* (0.161)	0.548** (0.208)	0.488** (0.217)
Healthcare-related issue salience	-0.257 (0.138)	-0.115 (0.163)	0.085 (0.173)
Healthcare evaluation x Issue salience (ref. = No salient issue + same evaluation category)			
A lot worse	-0.257 (0.138)	-0.115 (0.163)	0.050 (0.173)
A little worse	-0.052 (0.116)	-0.203 (0.137)	0.112 (0.150)
Stayed the same	0.154 (0.100)	-0.022 (0.115)	0.090 (0.125)
A little better	-0.188 (0.201)	-0.441* (0.231)	-0.277 (0.243)
A lot better	1.018** (0.510)	2.032** (0.876)	2.155*** (0.926)
Retrospective evaluations of economic performance (ref.=A lot worse)			
A little worse	0.449*** (0.060)	0.321*** (0.072)	0.350*** (0.077)
Stayed the same	0.577*** (0.084)	0.409*** (0.102)	0.472*** (0.108)
A little better	0.812*** (0.106)	0.871*** (0.134)	0.958*** (0.142)
A lot better	0.497* (0.275)	0.481 (0.351)	0.691* (0.366)

Economy issue salience	0.237*** (0.065)	0.203** (0.076)	0.432*** (0.084)
Economy evaluation x Issue salience (ref. = No salient issue + same evaluation category)			
A lot worse	0.237*** (0.065)	0.203** (0.076)	0.432*** (0.084)
A little worse	-0.145* (0.078)	-0.153* (0.091)	0.016 (0.099)
Stayed the same	-0.146 (0.126)	-0.080 (0.149)	0.158 (0.160)
A little better	-0.113 (0.171)	-0.155 (0.212)	0.030 (0.226)
A lot better	0.073 (0.498)	-0.318 (0.607)	-0.303 (0.622)
Ideological distance to government		-0.240*** (0.011)	-0.251*** (0.011)
N	10180	7383	7036
Log likelihood	-6415.864	-4561.681	-4164.606
Pseudo R ²	0.017	0.080	0.129

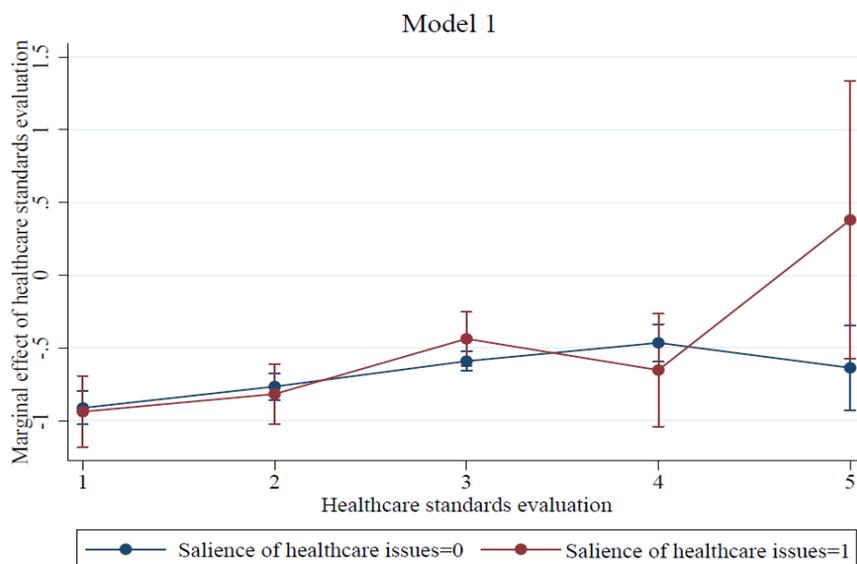
Note: binary logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

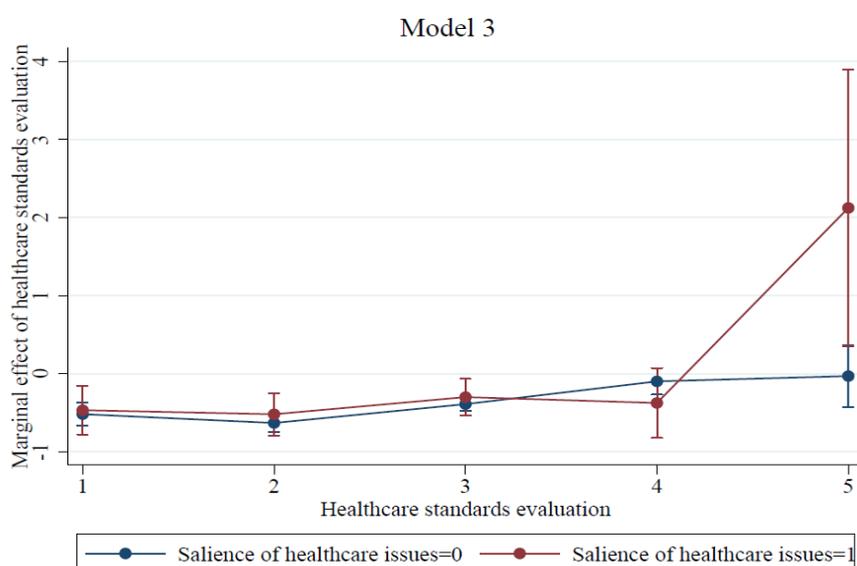
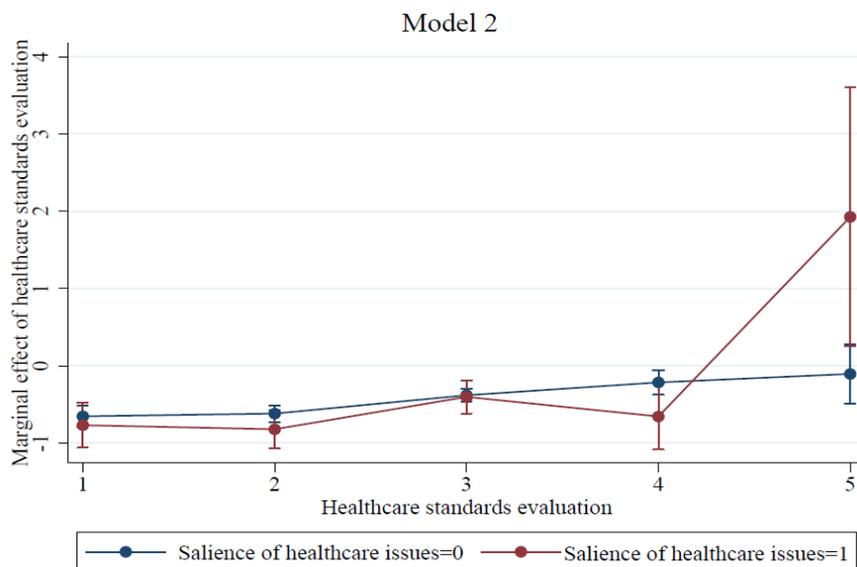
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

Table 2 reports the effect of issue salience on vote intentions for fixed categories of healthcare and economy evaluations, while Figure 1 and 2 visualize the marginal effects of each interaction term. The evidence in support of the *healthcare issue voting* hypothesis, while not overwhelming, is noteworthy nonetheless. First of all, the majority of predictor effects on the dependent variable appear to be statistically insignificant. In fact, there seems to be no statistically significant effect that would imply perceptions of deteriorating healthcare standards in combination with issue saliency to be correlated with a declining probability of government support. This is more precisely illustrated in Figure 1; while the probability of voting for incumbents generally decreases with more negative perceptions on healthcare standards, it differs only marginally between the pool of respondents who view healthcare issues to be salient and those who do not, indicated by the contiguity of both lines. Second, the sign of one coefficient (see Model 2) signifies that the direction of the relationship is the opposite of what had been anticipated: between all respondents who found

healthcare standards to have improved slightly, those who were of the opinion that healthcare issues are among the most important issues were *less* likely to credit their government's efforts than their counterparts. With a significance level of 90% and presence in only one model, the effect does not seem to be particularly robust, however. Third, across all models, the likelihood of a voter planning to cast their vote in favor of incumbents is higher if they are of the opinion that healthcare standards are one of the most pressing issues and have improved substantially than if they did not prioritize healthcare standard issues. This is marked by the sharp increase of the second line relative to the first line in Figure 1, suggesting a greater probability of voting for incumbents. Taken as a whole, the results indicate that individuals who value healthcare standards are more likely to intend *rewarding* incumbents with reelection if healthcare standards improved a lot, but not necessarily more likely to *punish* incumbents if healthcare standards declined. The *healthcare issue voting* hypothesis can therefore be confirmed partially.

Figure 1. Marginal effects of healthcare standards evaluation on vote intention.



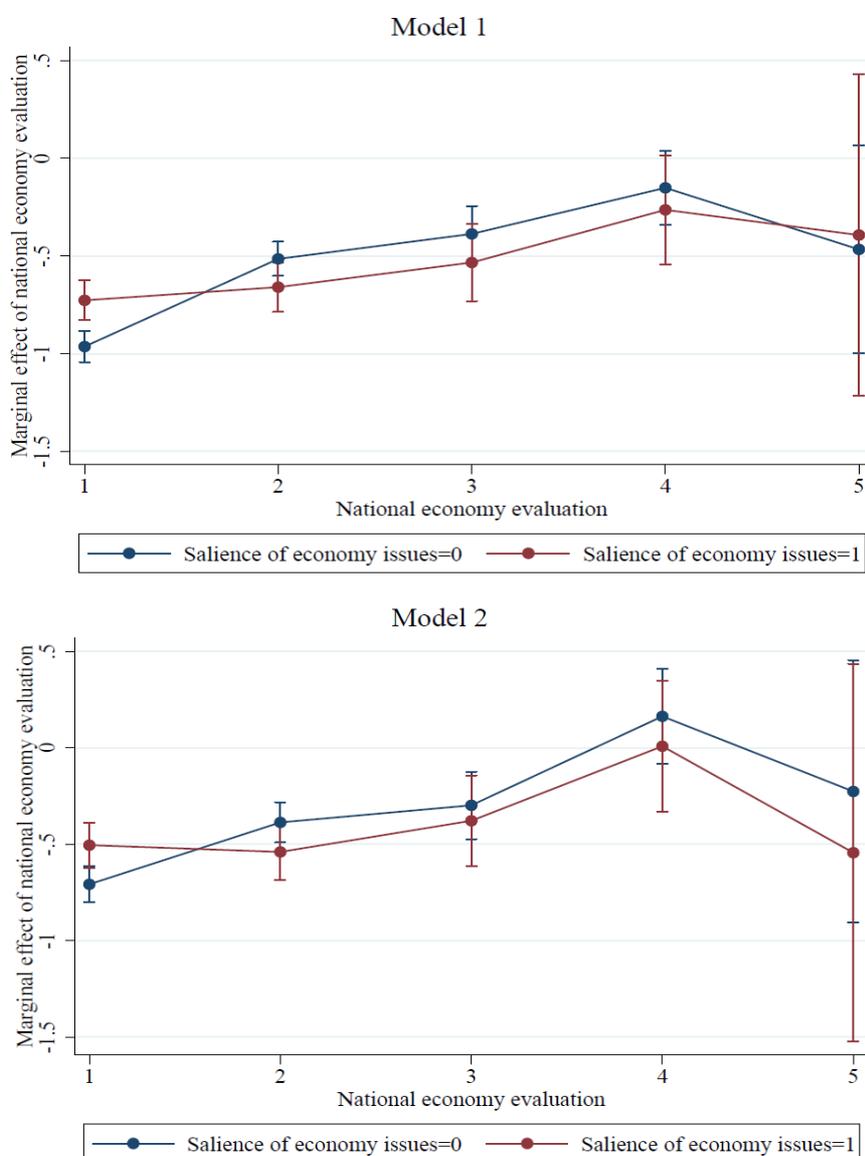


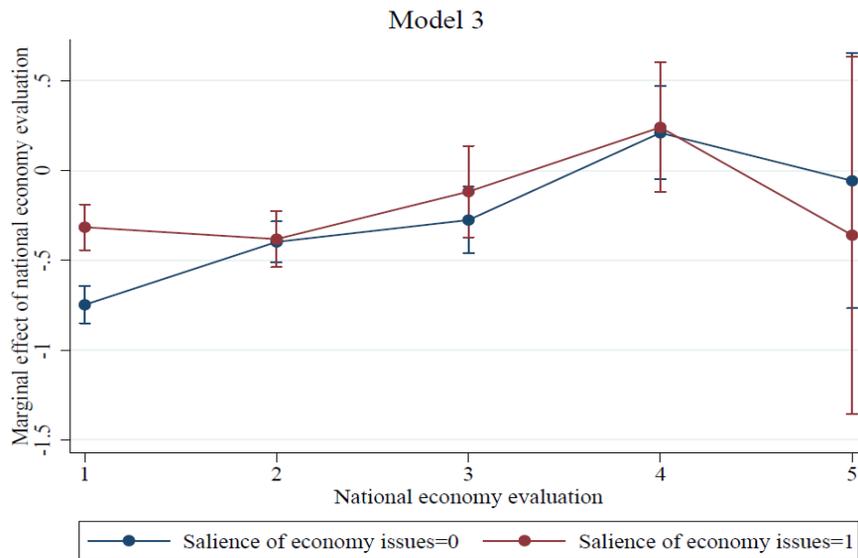
Furthermore and going against initial expectations, there is almost no evidence to support the *economic salience* hypothesis whatsoever. While results of Model 1 and 2 are in line with expectations insofar as respondents who consider economic performance as a pressing issue and are of the opinion that economic performance has declined slightly are more likely to intend voting opposition parties than those who do not consider it a salient issue, the results are only weakly significant with a confidence level of 90%. In contrast, respondents who are of the opinion that economic performance has declined sharply and find it to be a salient issue are *more likely* to intend voting for incumbents than those who do not consider it salient across all models with a high

significance at a confidence level of 99%. In light of this robust relationship, the empirical effect of economic issue salience seems to be in the reversed direction than anticipated. Naturally, the *economic issue voting* hypothesis cannot be supported by the results.

Finally, results of Table 2 indicate that the probability of supporting incumbents decreases with greater ideological distance to the governing parties as predicted. The relationship is highly significant and robust with a confidence level of 99% across all three models.

Figure 2. Marginal effect of national economy evaluations on vote intentions.





Study 2

Table 3. Linear regression results on popularity shifts of government parties (Study 2).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	-18.547 (14.459)	-22.691 (14.828)	-18.615 (20.155)	-17.224 (16.311)	-9.140 (23.658)
Shifts in healthcare quality	-2.371 (5.393)	-1.855 (5.392)	-4.380 (6.830)	2.966 (6.013)	-1.196 (8.979)
Salience of healthcare issues	0.273 (0.387)	0.298 (0.386)	1.835* (0.975)	0.192 (0.452)	2.574* (1.475)
Salience of healthcare issues growth X Shifts in healthcare standards	0.113 (0.529)	0.081 (0.528)	0.166 (0.595)	-0.395 (0.592)	-0.023 (0.837)
Shifts in GDP	6.921 (13.572)	8.471 (13.589)	-19.185 (20.447)	8.323 (14.173)	-18.086 (24.789)
Salience of economic growth issues	-2.742 (6.267)	-2.189 (6.264)	-11.207 (10.532)	-6.257 (6.387)	-10.555 (12.054)

Saliency of economic growth X Shifts in GDP	3.068 (5.374)	2.692 (5.365)	11.787 (8.698)	5.613 (5.450)	10.560 (9.953)
Coalition government (Reference=no coalition)		3.252 (2.743)	9.812 (7.815)	3.476 (2.956)	9.002 (9.656)
R ²	0.085	0.106	0.563	0.305	0.666
Adj. R ²	-0.006	0.000	0.005	0.063	-0.160
N	66	66	66	66	66

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

Surprisingly, and in stark contrast with Study 1, the majority of predictors in Study 2 appear to have no statistical impact on government popularity whatsoever. Neither the interaction terms, nor variables of economic performance or healthcare quality have a statistically significant effect on how governing parties fare in subsequent elections for any single model. In fact, the only predictor with a significant effect on the independent variable seems to be the healthcare issue saliency variable: government support increases by approximately 1.8 and 2.6 percentage points for Model 3 and 5 respectively if healthcare issue saliency increases by one unit. Yet, these results do not seem to be robust, since the coefficients are only significant at a confidence level of 90% and carry a significant effect in the minority of models.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

The notion of holding governments accountable for policy outcomes is one of the core pillars of representative democracy and, at the same time, one of the most discussed topics in political science. By rewarding good policy performance of governments with reelection and bad governance with defection to the opposition, voters can compel incumbents to protect as well as represent public interests at the policy level, thereby securing democratic control over politics. Most scientific investigations into this reward-punishment mechanism have focused on the electoral

effect of economic performance, assuming explicitly or implicitly, that voters primarily care about the state of the economy when casting their ballots. When confronted by findings suggesting that the effect of economic performance on vote choice is inconsistent, several scholars came to the conclusion that democratic accountability is a rare phenomenon, arguing that voters would be even less likely to hold incumbents liable for performance in policy domains with conceivably less important issues (Anderson, 2007, p. 276; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020, p. 100).

However, empirical findings have revealed that economic affairs are not always the main concern of voters, raising the question of whether issue salience moderates the electoral responses to performance in certain policy domains. This study set out to address this by investigating the question: *To what extent and under what conditions does the salience of issues in a given policy domain enhance the electoral responses to governments' policy performance within that domain?* The paper attempted to answer this question by examining whether the electoral effects of economy and healthcare policy performance are more pronounced when economy or healthcare-related issues are salient, while at the same time it tested the effect of economic as well as healthcare policy performance. For that purpose, the paper conducted two separate studies drawing on individual-level mass survey data (Study 1) and macro-level data (Study 2) which allowed for investigating the effect differences on vote choice between alternative measurements for policy performance as well as issue salience, and provided the added benefit of checking for result robustness.

Derived from the classic version of the reward-punishment mechanism, the first two hypotheses tested were the *healthcare voting* and *economic voting* hypotheses. While the first study employed voter perceptions as measures of policy performance, the second study used objective indicators of economic growth and expert evaluations for economic performance and healthcare quality, respectively. The results of Study 1 indicate that voters with improving perceptions on healthcare standards and national economy conditions have a higher probability of supporting

incumbents, largely corroborating the standard reward-punishment hypothesis. Even when adding control variables and country controls, the effect largely holds, meaning that the results are robust. In contrast, predictor variables in Study 2 displayed no effect on government popularity, neither for economic growth, nor for healthcare quality. It is questionable whether the expert evaluations data on healthcare quality are reliable, since they were obtained from the IPD, a data set, which is not frequently used in empirical research. Still, data reliability does not explain why economic growth, measured in terms of relative changes in GDP, had no statistical effect on government popularity for any of the five models, especially when considering that the variable is a standard measure of economic performance in the economic voting literature. Based on this difference, it could be inferred that perceptions of economic performance is a more accurate predictor of vote choice than objective indicators of economic performance. The finding would not be surprising; more often than not, voters described to have an incomplete picture on the state of the economy (or state of affairs more generally) and are generally averse to update their prior knowledge, resulting in a large discrepancy between objective indicators and subjective evaluations of economic performance (Anderson, 2007, p. 279-280). Evidently, this raises an important question in the context of practicing accountability – if the discrepancy between objective and subjective indicators of policy performance are wide enough, is it still possible to talk about "holding incumbents accountable to secure public interests"?

Moving on to the electoral effects of issue salience, the subsequent tested hypotheses were the *economic issue voting* and *healthcare issue voting* hypothesis. First of all, none of the interaction terms included in Study 2 seemed to have any effect on government popularity. This is most likely due to crucial validity and reliability problems associated with party manifesto data that was used as a proxy to measure issue salience.

Regression outcomes of Study 1 in contrast are puzzling. First, and in line with expectations, voters who viewed healthcare issues to be important and healthcare standards to have improved

substantially were more likely to reward their incumbents by intending to vote for them than voters who also were of the opinion that healthcare standards improved substantially, but did not find healthcare-related issues to be salient across all models. On the other hand, the contrary did not seem to hold true: compared to voters who did not find healthcare-related issues to be important and healthcare standards to have dropped substantially, the probability of supporting incumbents was not lower for voters who found healthcare-related issues to be salient and healthcare standards to have dropped significantly. Second, economic issue salience had almost no significant effect on vote intentions of respondents with one notable exception: across all models, voters who found economic issues to be salient and national economic conditions to have worsened significantly were more likely to support incumbents than those who also perceived economic conditions to have worsened, but did not consider economic issues to be salient issues. In short, voters prioritizing economic issues were more likely to *reward* incumbents for worsening economic conditions. In addition, and conversely to these findings, none of the interaction terms included in Study 2 seemed to have any effect on government popularity.

Taken as a whole, issue salience seems to have a moderating effect on vote choice, that is inconsistent across policy domains and performance perceptions. Though it would exceed the purpose of this paper to investigate the underlying causes for this difference in effect, some interesting lessons can still be drawn from these results. Under certain circumstances, issue salience seems to have a pervasive impact on vote choice. One possible explanation for this unexpected result can be related to the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. Considering that the data set used for Study 1 was compiled in the aftermath of the crisis in 2009, the financial shock could have realized an attitude of solidarity with the government, that increased the probability of a person to vote for the government parties, *in spite* of poor economic performance.

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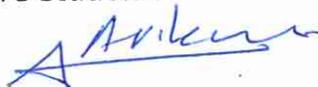
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