HOLDING GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE:
INDIVIDUAL HETEROGENEITY IN PERFORMANCE VOTING

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Abstract

This study examines individual heterogeneity in performance voting due to political sophistication and salience. Building on two recently developed theoretical perspectives – heterogeneous attribution and heterogeneous information – we test whether low sophisticated voters reward or punish incumbents more strongly for past performance than the highly sophisticated or whether, as the heterogeneous information argument expects, the opposite is true. Secondly, we expect performance voting to be stronger when voters attach a high degree of salience to a particular policy field. Utilizing cross-national data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) including 26 democracies, we examine these expectations, and explore how political sophistication and salience attached to a policy area mediate performance voting across an array of policy fields including the economy, social welfare, immigration and national security. Our findings provide empirical support for our expectations and are in line with a heterogeneous information perspective: performance voting increases with political sophistication, but the sophistication gap narrows as voters view a policy field as more important. This suggests that the degree of salience voters attach to certain policy outcomes offsets the informational costs of performance voting.

Key Words: Performance Voting, Government Accountability, Individual Heterogeneity, Political Sophistication & Salience.
1 Introduction

In order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens only need to calculate the changes in their own welfare. If jobs have been lost in a recession, something is wrong. If sons have died in foreign rice paddies, something is wrong. If thugs make neighbourhoods unsafe, something is wrong. If polluters foul food, water, or air, something is wrong. – M. P. Fiorina, 1981, pp. 5.

The above quote by Morris Fiorina illustrates the importance of understanding how voters reward or punish governments for past performance. The idea that voters use elections to hold governments to account lies at the heart of democratic theory. If governments fail to provide policy outcomes preferred by the majority of the citizenry, they are likely to lose office. In turn, a solid government record that is largely in tune with public demands may secure re-election. Numerous researchers have addressed issues pertaining to retrospective or performance voting (see for example Anderson 1995, 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Evans and Pickup 2010; Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin 2007, to name only a few). What most of these studies have in common is that they provide strong evidence for a link between the state of the economy and incumbent support. In addition, many authors show that the strength of this relationship is mediated by domestic institutions. A key finding within the performance voting literature over the last decades has been that institutional ambiguity camouflages responsibility for policy-making decisions and outcomes (Anderson 1995, 2000; Bengtsson 2004; Lewis-Beck 1988; Nadeau, Niemi and Yoshinaka 2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Samuels 2004; Tillman 2008; Whitten and Palmer 1999). A lack of institutional clarity hampers citizens’ ability to express their discontent by voting politicians out of office due to bad economic performance.

Notwithstanding the significance of these findings, some important questions remain, especially concerning individual heterogeneity. In order for citizens to judge if an incumbent deserves to be re-elected on the basis of past performance, voters need to be aware of government actions and the outcomes of these activities. While many authors have examined contextual heterogeneity in performance voting due to institutional differences, individual heterogeneity has received much less scholarly attention (for exceptions see Bartels 2005; Duch 2001; Gomez and Wilson 2001; Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2011; Tilley, Garry and Bold 2008). Many economic voting studies treat voters as homogeneous in their reaction to economic performance of incumbents (see for example Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Lewis-Beck 1988). This uniform treatment of voters is surprising given the large and well-established line of research from the US context demonstrating the conditional impact of political knowledge and political information for example on voters’ political attitudes and behavior (see Alvarez 1997; Basinger and Lavine 2005; Krosnick 1988; Lavine et al. 1996; Nie, Verba and Petrocik
This study is devoted to individual heterogeneity in performance voting. We harness the cross-national breadth of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems\(^1\) to examine the extent to which individual-level characteristics, such as political sophistication and salience of policy outcomes, mediate the degree to which voters hold government accountable for past performance. Our contribution adds to the state-of-the-art in two ways. First, we expand current work on performance voting by including voters’ evaluations of government performance across a large set of policy issues next to the economy, such as social welfare, immigration and national security. As the quote by Fiorina cited above suggests, extending our focus beyond the economy is important as it is merely one of many possible bases for evaluating incumbents. What is more, recent work suggests that the basic insights of economic voting should also hold for other policy fields (de Vries, Edwards and Tillman 2011; Giger 2011; Hellwig 2008; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Singer 2011).

Secondly, and more importantly, we present evidence that the degree to which voters reward or punish incumbents for past performance across different policy areas hinges on their level of political sophistication as well as the degree of salience they attach to particular policy outcomes. Specifically, our findings suggest that high sophisticates are more likely to relate their evaluations of an incumbent’s policy record to government support compared to voters at a lower level of sophistication, but that this sophistication gap is substantially reduced when voters view a policy field as important.

We argue that these findings are largely in line with the work of Duch (2001) on economic voting. According to Duch economic voting constitutes a problem of information acquisition. Consequently, in order for voters to effectively monitor the performance of governments, store their evaluations of a government’s record, and cast their ballot accordingly, they need a high degree of political information. In line with Zaller (1992) and Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996), he argues that “the reception of messages regarding policy outcomes (and their causes), such as economic performance, is highly contingent upon the level of political information” (Duch 2001, 896). Highly sophisticated voters evaluate incumbents on the basis of national economic performance, while lower sophisticated voters lack the relevant political information to do so. We also find that salience enhances the overall degree of performance voting and offsets the difference between high and low sophisticated voters. This is likely due to the fact that when voters care enough about policy outcomes within a particular domain, they are more likely to keep themselves up-to-date, and be more informed about government activities in this area as well as the possible implications of these actions. By consequence, salience lowers the informational costs associated with performance voting that Duch (2001) spells out.

Although Fiorina (1981, 5) suggested more than three decades ago that performance voting places only limited cognitive demands on voters as they “only have to calculate the changes in their own welfare” in order to “ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well”, our findings suggest that holding governments to account may be more laborious than often assumed.
This study proceeds as follows. The first section briefly reviews the literature on performance voting and presents our hypotheses. After outlining the data, method and operationalizations, we present the empirical results. We conclude by drawing several general lessons from our analysis and elaborate the implications of our findings for understanding the mechanisms through which voters hold their governments to account for policy performance.

2 Theory & Hypotheses

2.1 Performance Voting: The Reward-Punishment Model of Incumbent Support

Elections are one of the most straightforward means with which people living in a democracy can bend government activity to their favor. Electoral contests are thus, at least in part, referendums on the performance of incumbents. So far, an extensive literature within political science has examined the link between government performance and electoral outcomes, i.e. performance voting. These studies are based on the idea that citizens reward or punish incumbents for past behavior, and mainly focus on retrospective evaluations of government performance as important determinants of voting behavior (see for example Fiorina 1981; Miller and Shanks 1996). Central to this literature is the intuition that citizens sanction incumbents based on their evaluations of a government’s policy record. The reward-punishment model assumes voters to act rationally, and maximize their utility by evaluating the benefits they derive from policy outcomes implemented by the incumbent government. Performance evaluations thus mostly involve retrospective attitudes about how well incumbents have done. This being said, it is of course also possible that voters use their evaluations of the current government to inform their expectations about future performance (Fiorina 1981). To date a large body of work finds evidence supporting the performance voting model (Fiorina 1981; Miller and Shanks 1996, for example). A strong relationship seems to exist between economic performance and electoral support for incumbents (for useful overviews see Lewis-Beck 1988; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). The economic situation may factor into perceptions of government performance and incumbent support in two distinct ways (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). Either voters blame or reward the incumbent government on the basis of changes in their personal financial situation, i.e. pocketbook voting, or voters evaluate a government’s handling of the economy on the basis national economic performance, such as inflation or growth rates, i.e. sociotropic voting.

The assumption underlying either type of economic voting is that voters credit or blame governments for their dealings regarding the economy. This requires voters to assign responsibility for economic
outcomes and adjust their vote accordingly. A large strand of comparative research suggests that the degree to which institutional configurations obscure lines of responsibility for policy making hampers voters’ ability to evaluate and sanction the government in power for economic policy (Anderson 1995, 2000; Bengtsson 2004; Lewis-Beck 1988; Nadeau, Niemi and Yoshinaka 2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Samuels 2004; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Recently, this argument was expanded to demonstrate that clarity of responsibility affects voters participation more generally (Tillman 2008) and that vertical clarity, i.e. relating to shared policy making within federations mostly, also moderates performance voting (Anderson 2006; Arceneaux 2004; Cutler 2004, 2008). 

Notwithstanding the importance of the work on performance voting generally and economic voting specifically, some important questions remain, especially relating to heterogeneity across voters. This study advances current work in two ways: 1) it extends the scope of investigation beyond the economy, and 2) by doing so uncovers important individual level sources of variation in performance voting. Most of the current work on performance voting stems from economic voting. Evidently, the economy is not the sole domain used by citizens to evaluate their governments. While work from the US context often provides a more general account of retrospective voting showing that voters reward governors who reduce crime rates (Cummins 2009) or presidents who limit deaths in combat (Hibbs 2000), most of the comparative research is almost solely based on an economic perspective. This hampers our understanding of performance voting as we know from existing work that the economy is not the most important issue for every individual within each country context (Giger 2011; Hellwig 2008; Singer 2011; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). A second characteristic of most of the economic voting literature to date is that they treat voters’ reactions to economic performance of governments as rather uniform (see for example Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Lewis-Beck 1988). This homogeneous treatment of voters is potentially problematic as a large and well-established line of research from the US context has uncovered extensive individual heterogeneity in attitude formation and political behavior (see Alvarez 1997; Basinger and Lavine 2005; Krosnick 1988; Lavine et al. 1996; Nie, Verba and Petrock 1976; Palfrey and Poole 1987, to name a few). Consequently, it seems reasonable to expect that individual heterogeneity should also exist when it comes to rewarding or punishing governments for past performance. The explication of the relationship between voter characteristics and the level of performance voting is the topic we turn to next.
2.2 Political Sophistication & Performance Voting

The theoretical and empirical treatment of the reward-punishment model of incumbent support assumes voters to react to policy performance of governments in a rather homogeneous fashion. The expectation is that voters respond to bad economic performance or economic shocks in a fairly consistent way by punishing incumbents. Most analyses of performance voting on the basis of the economy pay little attention to fluctuations in performance voting due to voter characteristics. Recent work, however, criticizes the uniform treatment of voters’ responses, and suggests that individual heterogeneity in economic voting due to varying levels of political sophistication is extensive (Duch 2001; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2006). These authors argue that in order for voters to be able to sanction governments for past actions, they need to be able to link policy outcomes to governments’ activity. This link is likely less ambiguous for voters that are highly informed about politics. Although Fiorina (1981) suggested almost three decades ago that retrospective voting eases the cognitive demands put on voters, both Duch (2001) as well as Gomez & Wilson (2001) theoretically argue and empirically substantiate that political sophistication mediates the extent of performance voting. While both studies highlight the importance of individual heterogeneity, they put forward rather different theoretical mechanisms and present conflicting empirical evidence.

Gomez & Wilson (2001, 2006) develop a theory of heterogeneous attribution (HA) and understand performance voting as a process of blame attribution. In order for economic voting, or performance voting more generally, to work an individual voter has to be able to make causal associations between policy outcomes and the actors politically responsible. The authors argue that a voter’s ability to credit or blame incumbents for past performance hinges on her level of political sophistication. Drawing on the distinction between pocketbook and sociotropic voting, the HA perspective presumes that “political sophistication dramatically influences the relative importance of personal and national economic judgments in shaping individual candidate preferences” (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 900). Whereas pocketbook voting is likely to be restricted to the highly sophisticated, sociotropic voting is expected to be more extensive among lower sophisticated voters. This distinction arises due to the fact that voters at different levels of political sophistication vary in their ability to construct links between problems and their sources. “For low sophisticates attribution of responsibility is largely restricted to proximate, or local causes” (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 902). These voters are most likely to hold those actors responsible for an outcome who are most closely associated with it, and thus most obvious to blame. In the case of national economic performance for example, this would be the president or incumbent party, while the same low sophisticated voters are most likely to blame themselves for their own personal financial situation. Linking personal finances to a change in economic policy requires a
high degree of political sophistication. This also applies to weighing responsibility for national economic performance. Here highly sophisticated voters are likely to attribute only partial blame to incumbents as they realize that a government has limited influence over the national economy. Voters at a low level of political sophistication, on the other hand, lack the cognitive ability to make these type of fine-grained attributions, and thus blame the most obvious source for bad economic performance, namely the incumbent. While originally developed for economic voting Gomez & Wilson (2008) in a later study regarding blame attribution for Hurricane Katrina apply their HA argument more broadly to include performance in other policy domains.

Duch (2001) in his study of economic voting in new democracies puts forward a different expectation regarding the way in which political sophistication affects performance voting. Duch (2001) views economic voting more as a problem of information acquisition than blame attribution. His approach of heterogeneous information (HI) starts from the idea that in order for voters to effectively monitor the performance of their governments, store their evaluations of a government’s record, and cast their vote accordingly, they need a high level of political information. The reward-punishment model of incumbent support presumes that voters are overall reasonably well informed. Relying on the work of Fearon (1996) who formally demonstrates that a lack of information undermines the applicability of the reward-punishment model, Duch argues that voters can only mandate governments, and hold them accountable for policy outcomes when they have a large enough store of political information. In order for voters to make performance judgments and hold governments to account, they must be informed and knowledgeable about politics. Only if they are, will voters be able to comprehend and digest information relating to the state of the economy (see also Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). Less sophisticated voters have a tendency to rely on personal circumstances in order to make up for their lack of political knowledge, while highly sophisticated voters are better able to correctly perceive actual trends in economic performance. “As voters become more knowledgeable about the political process, ambiguities regarding the link between government policy and economic outcomes decline, and their level of economic voting rises” (Duch 2001, 897). While Duch in his 2001 study only focuses on economic voting, the theoretical conjectures of HI argument are likely to hold for performance voting in a large array of policy domains.

What becomes clear from the discussion of both approaches is that the HA and HI perspectives derive opposite predictions about the way in which political sophistication matters for performance voting. In this study we will test both expectations by examining performance voting across a large set of different policy areas. While most comparative studies focus almost exclusively on the state of the economy (for recent exceptions, see de Vries, Edwards and Tillman 2011; Giger 2011; Tilley and Hobolt 2011), US scholars have studied the effects of incumbent performance on voting decisions more generally (for work on this topic, see Alvarez and Saving 1997; Hibbs 2000; Cummins 2009; Levitt and
Snyder 1997). This US literature demonstrates that government performance in other policy areas, such as law and order or national security, matters for voters as well. Here we examine the relationship between government performance and incumbent support for a large set of countries across seven different issues areas, i.e. the economy, social, immigration, environment policy, external relations, national security plus law and order, as well as public services. In doing so, we test the following general hypothesis:

**Performance Voting Hypothesis (H1):** The more negative a voter’s evaluation of a government’s performance record, the less likely she will vote for the incumbent, all else being equal.

We know from the HA and HI perspectives that important individual heterogeneity in performance voting exists due to a voter’s level of political sophistication. Both perspectives, however, present different expectations about the way in which political sophistication affects performance voting which are formalized in the following two hypotheses:

**HA Performance Voting Hypothesis (H1A):** The degree of performance voting decreases with higher levels of political sophistication, all else being equal.

**HI Performance Voting Hypothesis (H1B):** The degree of performance voting increases with higher levels of political sophistication, all else being equal.

Note that both the HI and HA perspectives also include specific expectations about the way in which political sophistication affects sociotropic versus pocketbook voting. Unlike the economy, it is not always that obvious for the other policy domains included in this study if one can easily make a distinction between egocentric versus sociotropic performance evaluations. In the case of external relations or national security for example this differentiation might not be possible or even relevant. In addition, within our dataset we lack precise data allowing us to distinguish between voter evaluations of their personal situation versus societal judgments. As a result, we focus on voters’ evaluations about policy performance relating to the society at large only.
2.3 Salience & Performance Voting

The degree of performance voting may not only vary across individuals due to their level of political sophistication, but may also differ in accordance to the salience they attach to a given policy area. As stated earlier one of the contributions of our study originates from the fact that we examine performance voting beyond the economy. Studies have demonstrated that the degree of salience voters attach to the economy varies greatly from country to country, and in many country contexts voters deem other policy issues, such as social welfare, as much more important (Singer 2011). As a result, the degree of performance voting is likely to differ as a factor of the extent to which voters care about a government’s performance record in a given policy area. From the seminal work of Jon Krosnick (1988, 1990), we know that issue salience is a key determinant of the degree of issue voting. The reasoning is that the impact of policy attitudes on party or candidate approval and vote choice is strongest among those citizens that care about the respective policy. When voters make up their minds when casting their ballot, “they rarely take into consideration the entire array of available relevant evidence” (Miller and Krosnick 1996, 80). Quite the contrary, voters as bounded rational actors (Simon 1985) most likely only engage those pieces of information or prior knowledge that come to mind quickly and are readily retrievable (Fournier et al. 2003; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 1996). When we relate these ideas to the study of performance voting, voters are more likely to reward or punish governments based on policy performance they care about about. This expectation is formalized in the Salient Performance Hypothesis:

**Salient Performance Voting Hypothesis (H2):** The degree of performance voting (see H1) increases as a voter views the performance in a particular policy domain as important for her country, all else being equal.

Applying this general idea of salience to the HA and HI perspectives outlined in the previous section, we derive the following expectations. First, in the case of HI, we expect the gap between voters at a high and low level of political sophistication to narrow in the case of salient policy performance. This is largely due to the fact that when policy performance is salient to voters, the costs of getting informed will decrease as a result. Consequently, the behavior of low sophisticated voters will likely mimic that of the high sophisticates. If voters care enough about policy outcomes within a particular policy domain, they are more likely to stay informed about government activities in this area, and be aware of the possible implications of these actions. By consequence, we expect citizens with high and low
levels of political sophistication to behave similarly when it comes to rewarding or sanctioning incumbents on a policy they care about, while we also expect the overall level of performance voting to increase as a result. In the case of HA, we also expect the sophistication gap to narrow, as lower sophisticates are better able to make more careful and correct blame assessments if policy outcomes are important to them. These voters will become more aware of the fact that policy making involves many more actors than solely the incumbent, and is influenced by unforeseen events outside of the control of the government. That being said, on the basis of these more fine-grained blame attributions we would expect the overall level of performance voting to decrease as a result. This leads us to the following two hypotheses.

**HA Salient Performance Voting Hypothesis (H2A):** The sophistication gap in performance voting decreases when the salience of a policy issue is high, all else being equal, and the overall level of performance voting decreases as a result.

**HI Salient Performance Voting Hypothesis (H2B):** The sophistication gap in performance voting decreases when the salience of a policy issue is high, all else being equal, and the overall level of performance voting increases as a result.

3 Data, Operationalizations & Method

Following the empirical strategy employed both by Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2006) and Duch (2001), we test our hypotheses with election study data. In particular, we need information about general evaluations of government performance, as well as evaluations of incumbent performance on policies considered salient by voters. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Module 2 provides well suited data for our purpose. This module includes comparative election studies between 2002 and 2006 and focuses on government accountability and satisfaction with democracy. In particular, it enables us to distinguish between general government performance evaluations, the salience of policy domains in the eyes of individual voters as well as the evaluations of performance in these salient areas. Moreover, this dataset allows for a categorization of voters on the basis of their level of political sophistication. Let us to note two shortcomings of the data also already here: First, the CSES module does not allow us to distinguish between voter evaluations of their personal situation versus more general societal evaluations. We believe, however, that this distinction is less useful once we consider policy areas beyond the economy. Contrary to the this particular policy domain, it is not always
obvious for other areas, like national security or the environment, if one can easily make a distinction between egocentric versus sociotropic performance evaluations. Secondly, while our dataset allows us to test our hypotheses across a large set of policy domains beyond the economy and for a large range of countries, it proves impossible to tackle possible endogeneity problems between performance evaluations and vote choices.

Our dependent variable captures whether somebody voted for the incumbent government, i.e. for the government in power during Election Day. Based on respondents’ party vote choice, we create a dummy variable where 1) denotes a vote for a party in government, and 0) a vote for any other party. General performance captures the rating of a government’s record based on citizens’ evaluations of government performance in general. We label this variable “general performance” to differentiate it from the second performance measure which is based on salient policy domains only.

In order to capture government performance evaluations of salient policy areas, we rely on two questions in the CSES survey. The first question reads:

*What do you think has been the most important issue facing the country over the last [number of years that the last government was in office] years?*

This open-ended question allows citizens to say which issues are personally salient to them, and more importantly the question comes in a not biasing format as it asks respondents about the most important issue rather than the most important problem (for a critical discussion of the most important problem format see Wlezien 2005). Crucial for our purpose is that this question is followed by an item asking about the performance of the government concerning the issue area rated as most important by the same voter. We use the information from these two questions to construct a variable we label “salient performance”. To allow for simple comparisons across issue areas we break down the hundred of individual responses to the “most important issue” question into 7 policy categories: economy, social policy, external relations, public administration and services, immigration and asylum, national security plus law and order, environment and other quality of life issues. These categories reflect the most important policy areas which are cross-nationally comparable.

Our third independent variable of interest concerns political sophistication. We understand political sophistication as the store of political knowledge available to an individual to be called upon when making judgments or decisions (see for example Zaller 1992). We measure political sophistication by utilizing factual knowledge questions available in the CSES survey. Our variable consists of an index counting the correct answers to the three country-specific knowledge questions and ranges accordingly from 0 to 3. When studying the moderating influence of political sophistication, scholars often distinguish between voters’ subjective assessment of political interest and their factual political knowledge. We opt for factual knowledge rather than subjective assessments of political interest as
although both variables tap into the same latent trait, factual knowledge measures are less affected by social desirability bias as they are not based on self-reporting (see Zaller 1992).

Finally, we control for other individual level factors affecting incumbent vote, i.e. ideological left-right position in favor of the incumbent, as well as for a series of socio-demographic factors, i.e. employment status, age and gender. Please note that our results hold even after the inclusion of incumbent party identification as it can be argued that political sophisticates are both more likely to be partisans and to strive for consistency in responses to surveys.8

Multilevel models are the method of choice to adequately treat the data at hand, where individuals are nested in countries. The observations from one context are interdependent in the sense that they duplicate each other to a certain degree as soon as they are influenced by contextual factors, i.e. the variance in the observed outcome is partially explained by the shared context. As a consequence, the basic OLS regression assumption of uncorrelated errors is violated. Statisticians clearly state that ignoring the multilevel data structure leads to inflated standard errors and an increased risk of committing Type-I (or Alpha) errors, i.e. rejecting a null hypothesis which states no effect (Snijders and Bosker 1999; Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Since our dependent variable is dichotomous in nature, we estimate multilevel regression models with a logit link function.

In detail, our model includes individual variables (X, their estimates \( \beta \) respectively), controlling for the non-specified context variance (\( \mu_0 \)). As our theory assumes that an interaction between two individual level variables, we include the interaction term (\( Z_{ij}X_{ij} \)), its estimate respectively. In detail, our equation takes the following form:

\[
\text{Logit } \pi_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \beta_2 Z_{2ij} + \ldots + \beta_n X_{nj} + \ldots + \gamma_1 Z_{ij}X_{ij} + \mu_{0j}
\]

4 Empirical Results

We begin the discussion of our empirical results by exploring evidence regarding the salience of the economy and other policy domains across countries. Although it is often at least implicitly assumed that the economy is the most important issue for voters, and that governments are rewarded or punished on the basis of their performance in this policy field, the dominance of economic performance for voters has recently been challenged by Singer (2011). He suggests that large scale individual and contextual variance exists in the salience of economic performance.
Figure 1 confirms this idea. Although the economy is one of the three most important policy areas for voters in 21 out of the 26 countries shown here, only around a quarter of the population rates this issue as most salient, i.e. 25.6 percent. This leaves about 75 percent highlighting other policy areas as more important. This evidence underlines the importance of studying performance voting not only based on the economy, but more broadly for all kinds of policy areas that voters care about.

Let us now turn to the evidence regarding our hypotheses. The results of the multilevel logistic regressions focusing on individual heterogeneity in performance voting are shown in Table 1. It is clear that our empirical evidence supports the idea that government performance across different policy areas – including the economy – is an important predictor of incumbent vote (see Model 1). The results indicate that voters use their evaluations of governments’ past actions to either reward or punish incumbents; the more negative a voter’s evaluation of the incumbent performance record, the lower the probability of incumbent support. This finding is in line with our Performance Hypothesis. In addition, the results in Model 2 show that this relationship is mediated by the degree of political sophistication among voters. This is in line with the HA and HI perspective, but the question remains if the level of performance voting is higher among highly sophisticated voters as the HI argument would suggest, or if the opposite pattern holds which would be in line with the HA hypothesis.

As the interpretation of logistic regression coefficients and interaction terms in particular are notoriously difficult (Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006), we graphically display the results of the interaction. In Figure 2 the increase in performance voting for higher sophisticated becomes visible, indicated by the upward trend in the marginal effect of political sophistication. As such, our empirical results support the HI argument (HI Performance Hypothesis), and suggest that highly political sophisticated voters who have higher levels of information about politics are better able to link government performance evaluations to incumbent support. The association between policy performance and government support is much more ambiguous among lower sophisticated voters who are therefore less likely to punish or reward incumbents. These results show that this is not only the case for economic voting as Duch (2001) suggests, but holds for government performance more generally.
Delving deeper into the relationship between voter characteristics and performance voting, we now turn to the results for salient performance. We examine the impact of government performance evaluations on incumbent support when taking into account the evaluation of the government on the policy domain an individual voter views as the most important for her country. Model 3 reports the effect of salient performance without the interaction with political sophistication. Again, we find corroboration for our conjectures, namely the Salient Performance Hypothesis. Indeed, positive evaluations of government performance on salient issues are strongly linked to an increased probability of incumbent vote, and vice versa. Moreover, when we compare the model fit based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) the salient performance model (Model 3) performs better than our general performance model (Model 1) which is in line with the idea that performance voting increases when a policy domain is salient to a voter.

Model 4 finally reports the findings of the moderating effect of political sophistication and salient performance. Comparing the interaction effect in Model 2 and 4, we see that the interaction in the latter model is weaker indicating that, as hypothesized, the sophistication gap decreases when a voter views a policy domain as salient. Interestingly, we find that while for negative performance ratings no difference exist between high and low sophisticated voters, highly sophisticated do show a higher propensity to use their positive performance evaluations in their decision at the ballot box for a policy area they render more importance, see Figure 3. This is in line with Duch’s finding that political information primarily conditions the voting behavior of those with positive performance perceptions. In general, the moderating effect of political sophistication is weaker for government evaluations based on the most important policy. However, although on the basis of the HA and HI perspectives we would expect no interaction effect with political sophistication for salient performance, the results displayed in Figures 2 and 3 show that this theoretical expectation is only partly supported by the data. The results show that an interaction exists, but that its effect is weaker in the case of salient performance compared to general performance, and only applies to very positive performance ratings. Overall, our findings support the idea that salience offsets the cognitive demands placed on voters when attempting to link policy performance to incumbent support.
Although we find that salience narrows the political sophistication gap in performance voting which is in line with both the HA and HI perspectives, the arguments diverge when it comes to the effect of the waning impact of sophistication. While in line with the HI perspective we would expect the overall level of performance voting to increase due to salience, the HA perspective leads us to the opposite prediction. We examine the last part of hypotheses H2A and H2B by exploring changes in model fit. Based on a comparison of the BIC, it becomes evident that Model 4 performs better than Model 2 indicating that the overall impact of performance voting is larger when the salience of a policy issue is high. This finding again corroborates the HI perspective which predicts a decrease in the political sophistication gap due to salient performance evaluations, and an increase in the overall level of performance voting respectively.

6 Discussion & Conclusion

It is widely argued that governments face serious electoral penalties when voters are dissatisfied with economic outcomes. Indeed, a large body of comparative work demonstrates the effect of economic performance on incumbent support. This outcome tracks nicely with the intuition that elections serve as important accountability mechanisms through which the public mandates a government, and evaluates its activities after a term in office. Notwithstanding, the economy is clearly not the only area in which the public wants to keep public officials in check. Although cross-national studies of economic voting are widespread, comparative scholarly work on performance voting more generally is much less frequent. This study addresses this lacuna and examines if voters within 26 advanced democracies reward or punish incumbents for policy performance more generally. It replicates the main finding within the economic voting literature and shows that voters indeed hold incumbents to account for past performance in many policy areas.

This result may give rise to the conclusion that popular elections serve one of their main purposes, namely ensuring democratic accountability, rather well. Yet, our findings also demonstrate that extensive variation in performance voting exists due to differences in political sophistication which suggests that the prospects for voters to hold governments to account for policy may be slightly dimmer. Building on the work of Gomez & Wilson (2001, 2006) and Duch (2001), we show that political sophistication strongly affects the degree to which voters are able to credit or blame incumbents. Highly sophisticated voters seem more able to use elections as an effective tool to mandate and hold public officials accountable for past actions. Low sophisticates often lack the ability (or will) to access the information needed to reward or punish governments. Indeed, political facts are not easy to come by given that both politicians, aiming to sway public sentiment in their favor to secure re-election, and
the media, wanting to maintain consumer interest, often lack the incentives to provide them. The sophistication gap in performance voting potentially casts doubt on whether elections are the most appropriate or effective means through which ordinary citizens can bend government policy in their favor, and provides additional rationale for developing complementary mechanisms for democratic accountability (see for example Gersbach and Liessem 2008).

That being said, our result demonstrating that salience partially offsets the high information requirements for performance voting delivers some release for proponents of existing electoral configurations. We show that the gap in performance voting between high and low sophisticated voters narrows when voters view a policy domain as important for their county. This finding suggests that salience may at least partially negate the informational costs associated with performance voting. Voters are more likely to keep themselves informed about government activities, and the possible implications of these actions for policy domains they care about. As a result, voters at a high and low level of political sophistication are likely to behave quite similarly when it comes to rewarding or sanctioning incumbents for policy outcomes if they care about the particular policy area at hand. Overall, these findings indicate that our understanding of performance voting benefits greatly from paying more close attention to the psychological roots of heterogeneity among voters.

This study also provides interesting avenues for further research. First, some of the findings presented may suffer from endogeneity. For example, do voters reward or punish governments, and change their vote choice as a result, or is it perhaps the other way around? Recent work by Tilley and Hobolt (2011) examines some of these complex causal relationships using an experimental set-up. They show that partisan loyalties have only limited effects on performance evaluations. Although our findings hold when we control for partisanship, it may prove important for future work to study the causal mechanism we propose here more in-depth. Next, and related to the previous point, we argue and empirically substantiate that the more a voter cares about a policy area, the more likely she is to use government performance in this policy area as a heuristic for a ballot choice. Although this finding is intuitive, and in line with a large body of theoretical work within the field of political psychology, it may still prove useful to explore the exact mechanisms more carefully. It could very well be the case that performance evaluations and the degree of salience a voter attaches to them are interdependent. Voters may care more about negative policy outcomes than about positive ones, and may therefore be more willing to punish incumbents as a result, or vice versa. Unraveling the causal chain relating to salience, performance evaluations, and incumbent support by means of experiments may be a promising line of future research. Third, both the HI and HA perspectives include specific expectations about the way in which political sophistication affects sociotropic versus pocketbook voting which should be tested in a cross-national setting. For our purposes, this distinction was less useful or relevant. As mentioned before contrary to the economy, it is not always that obvious for other policy
domains, like national security for example, if one can easily make a distinction between egocentric versus sociotropic performance evaluations. Also, we lack precise data allowing us to distinguish between voter evaluations of their personal situation versus societal judgments based on the economy. In future work, it would be worthwhile to examine the way in which political sophistication mediates sociotropic versus pocketbook voting respectively in a cross-national perspective. Finally, the evidence put forward in this study seems to suggest that the moderating effects of political sophistication are stronger for voters who aim to reward governments compared to those voters intending to punish incumbents (see also Duch 2001, for similar findings). Although this finding does not constitute the main topic of our research, it seems like a striking result that deserves more thorough examination.

Despite these interesting avenues for future research, this study has made an important contribution to the study of performance voting, and our understanding of democratic accountability. Overall, our results provide a rather mixed assessment of the way in which elections safeguard accountability of political elites. On the one hand, they lead to a rather cautious tale about the degree to which electoral accountability by itself is properly suited to incentivize public officials to craft policy solutions that benefit all voters given that only a subset of these voters have the capacity (or the will) to hold them accountable. On the other hand, our findings suggest that as long as voters care enough about government activities in a particular policy area, incumbents can expect to earn credit for favorable or blame for unsatisfactory policy outcomes which should provide ample impetus for responsive policy-making.
References


Tables & Figures

Figure 1: Variation in salience

Note: Categories based on own coding. More information available in the Appendix.
Figure 2: General performance voting mediated by political sophistication

Note: All other variable at their mean/mode. Low values on the x-axis indicate negative performance evaluations.
Figure 3: Salient performance voting mediated by political sophistication

Note: All other variable at their mean/mode. Low values on the x-axis indicate negative performance evaluations.
Table 1: Individual heterogeneity in performance voting

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Note: *** significant at p <.001; ** significant at p <.01 (two-tailed).
Endnotes

1 In detail, our sample includes national election data between 2002 and 2006 from the following countries: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal (2 elections within the timeframe), Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, USA.

2 Performance voting should therefore be distinguished from issue voting models which are also dominant within the study of electoral behavior (Enelow and Hinich 1984; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). The latter perspective emphasizes the importance of policy issues for explaining voters’ ballot choices. The most widely used conceptualization of issue voting is the proximity model as developed by Enelow and Hinich (1984) in their seminal work *The Spatial Theory of Voting*. This model assumes that voters act rationally, and vote for policy proposals which form the basis of future government. The rationale here is that each voter’s utility of a party (or candidate) on a particular policy issue is a negative function of the issue distance between a voter and a party. In the case of redistributive attitudes for example, one would expect voters to cast their ballot for a party or candidate which issue position on redistribution is most proximate to their own. Perceived in this way, public policy preferences are largely prospective in nature and portray differences over what the government should do.

3 We note that a more complete test of the heterogeneous information and the heterogeneous attribution perspective would require a more fine grained empirical strategy as theoretically performance evaluation and vote choice are only indirectly linked with blame attribution to the government being the intermediate step. Further, the causal direction of the influence might be reciprocal as people who vote for the incumbent are also more likely to evaluate the government more favorably in terms of performance. However, such a test is only feasible in an experimental setting.

4 In detail, our sample includes national election data between 2002 and 2006 from the following countries: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal (2 elections within the timeframe), Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, USA. As our sample comprises a large variety of countries, we tested the validity of our results by replicating them while excluding one country at the time. The results of this jackknife procedure demonstrates that our findings are robust and thus provides evidence for the generalizability of our findings to all industrialized societies.

5 Note that the results are robust against the use of vote choice in favor of the Prime Minister party only; see the Supplementary Material section for more details.

6 Our categorization has been cross-checked with (Singer 2011) which yields high correlations. See the Supplementary Material section for more details.

7 An alternative operationalization of political sophistication is to take the percentage of correct placements of political parties on the left-right scale. Our results are stable against the use of this alternative operationalization and also stable against the use of education as third alternative specification of political sophistication, see the Supplementary Material section for more details.

8 Note that our choice of controls is rather parsimonious as the range of sociodemographic controls present in all election studies is limited. For more information on the specific questions used see the Supplementary Material section. Also, the inclusion of further controls does not alter the results presented here, see the Supplementary Material section.