

# HOLDING GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE? INDIVIDUAL HETEROGENEITY IN PERFORMANCE VOTING

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## Abstract

This study suggests that performance voting is characterized by extensive individual heterogeneity. Most economic voting studies to date treat voters as rather homogeneous in their reactions to economic performance of incumbents. Yet, a large and well-established line of research from the US context demonstrates the conditional impact of political sophistication and salience on voters' political attitudes and behavior. Building on this work, we explore individual-level variation in performance voting due to political sophistication and salience. Utilizing cross-national data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) including 25 democracies, we examine performance voting across an array of policy areas including the economy, social welfare, immigration and national security, and show that political sophistication and salience are key moderators of performance voting. Our findings suggest that holding governments to account for past performance is mainly the prerogative of the highly sophisticated and thus may be more laborious than previously assumed. At the same time, our results indicate that the sophistication gap in performance voting narrows when voters attach a higher degree of salience to a policy area. As long as voters care enough about government activities in a particular policy area, incumbents can expect credit or blame for policy outcomes. This should provide ample impetus for responsive policy-making.

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

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## 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 moderated 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 importance of these findings, some key questions remain, especially regarding individual heterogeneity. Most economic voting studies treat voters as rather 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 sophistication and salience on voters' political attitudes and behavior (Alvarez 1997; Basinger and Lavine 2005; Krosnick 1988; Kulinski et al. 2001; Lau and Redlawsk 2001, Sniderman et al. 1991 to name a few; for a recent application in the Italian case see Baldassari 2013). This study is devoted to exploring individual heterogeneity in performance voting due to political sophistication and salience. Our argument is twofold. First, we maintain that in order for citizens to judge if an incumbent deserves to be re-elected based on past performance, they need to be aware of government actions and the outcomes of these activities. By consequence, we expect a sophistication gap in performance voting to exist as only voters at a high level of political sophistication are able to relate policy outcomes to government activities (see also Duch 2001; Duch et al. 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2008, 2010). Second, we argue that increasing salience of a policy area will lower the cognitive costs associated with performance voting, and thus narrow the sophistication gap.

In order to test these expectations, we harness the cross-national breadth of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems<sup>1</sup>. Our findings support our expectations and 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. Although Fiorina (1981, 5) posited more than three decades ago that performance voting places just 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 previously assumed. Yet, our results also suggest that the sophistication gap in performance voting is substantially reduced when voters view a policy area as important. 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 government actions.

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 on 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 Story Thus Far*

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, a phenomenon coined *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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> To date, a large body of work finds evidence in support of 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 assumption underlying the theory of economic voting is that voters credit or blame governments for their handling of 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 this work key questions remain. 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. Evidently, the economy is not the sole domain used by citizens to evaluate their governments. We know from existing work that the economy is not the most important issue for every individual within each country context (see especially Singer 2011). Consequently, the specific focus on the economy hampers our understanding of performance voting more generally. A second shortcoming in the economic voting literature to date is that most studies 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; Kulinski et al. 2001; Lau and Redlawsk 2001, Sniderman et al. 1991 to name a few; for a recent application in the Italian case see Baldassari 2013). Consequently, it seems reasonable to expect that individual heterogeneity should also exist when it comes to rewarding or punishing governments for past performance.<sup>4</sup> 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 due to political sophistication and salience. Individual heterogeneity in performance voting is the topic we turn to next.

## *2.2 Individual Heterogeneity in Performance Voting*

### *2.2.1 The Sophistication Gap in Performance Voting*

Most of the theoretical and empirical accounts of the reward-punishment model of incumbent support thus far assume 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 et al. 2000; Duch 2001; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2006; Duch and Stevenson 2008, 2010). 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 who are highly informed about politics. Although Fiorina (1981) suggested almost three decades ago that retrospective voting eases the cognitive demands put on voters, current work suggest that weighing responsibility for national economic performance is a difficult task. Economic voting is expected to vary systematically with political sophistication.

Why would we expect differences between high and low sophisticates in the degree to which they use performance judgments when deciding to punish or reward an incumbent? In order for voters to decide whether or not to re-elect an incumbent, they need to effectively monitor the performance of their government, store their evaluations of a government's record, and cast their ballot accordingly. These steps are effortful and require a fair amount of political information (Alvarez 1997). Indeed, formal work by Fearon (1996) demonstrates that a lack of information undermines the applicability of the reward-punishment model. Applying these ideas to economic voting, Duch (2001, see also Duch et al. 2000) argues that selecting or sanctioning a government based on its handling of the economy essentially boils down to a process of information acquisition. Although Fiorina might be right in stating that compared to having to come to grips with all the details of party's policy platform casting a ballot on the basis of past performance eases electoral decision making, the acquisition of performance

information itself is an arduous task. Voters incur costs whilst collecting and processing information both in terms of time and effort expended. Yet, research suggests that voters are by-and-large rather ill-informed about politics and pay only sporadic attention to what happens in the political domain (see for example Luskin 1987; Carpini and Keeter 1996). For the majority of voters political facts are hard to come by. What is more, the costs of getting informed about policy performance may simply not outweigh the benefits associated with electorally rewarding or sanctioning the incumbent. Informational costs might be especially pertinent for electoral decision making based on performance as the effects of specific policy outcomes are often intangible and difficult to re-construct.

Although voters can frequently “compensate for their limited information about politics by taking advantage of judgemental heuristics” (Sniderman et al. 1991: 18), research demonstrates that mostly high sophisticated voters are able and motivated to use heuristics to lessen the cognitive burden of casting a ballot (Kulinski, et al. 2001; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Baldassarri 2013).<sup>5</sup> Relying on performance evaluations to decide whether to re-elect or oust an incumbent constitutes such a heuristic for electoral decision making, yet only high sophisticates can realistically be expected to have the appropriate performance information and cast a ballot accordingly. Voters at a higher level of political sophistication have greater access to and ability to digest political information and should therefore face far lower costs of getting informed about specific policy outcomes compared to low sophisticates. The reason for this is straightforward: a voter’s store of political knowledge influences the way she perceives, remembers and interprets the political world around her. Higher levels of political sophistication make voters better able to link political information to political choices.

We thus expect extensive individual heterogeneity in performance due to political sophistication. Voters must be informed and knowledgeable about politics in order to make performance judgments and use them to hold governments to account. Only if they are, will voters be able to comprehend and digest information about policy outcomes and relate it to an incumbent’s record (see also Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). As voters become more knowledgeable about the political process, ambiguities regarding the link between government policy outcomes decline, and we can expect their level of performance voting to rise as a result (see Duch, 2001). Although the classic reward-punishment model of incumbent

support assumes voters to react to policy performance of governments in a rather homogeneous fashion, the acquisition of enough information to cast a ballot on the basis incumbent performance is effortful and costly. Variation in performance voting due to voters' level of political sophistication seems likely. In his study of new electoral democracies in Eastern Europe more than a decade ago, Duch (2001) indeed finds that economic voting is more pronounced among the high sophisticates.

While Duch only focuses on economic voting in a small subset of countries, it is reasonable to expect that differences due to political sophistication should characterize performance voting across a large array of policy domains.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we expect higher levels of performance voting among voters at a higher level of political sophistication. High sophisticates can more easily tap into an existing store of political information which in turn not only lowers the costs of getting informed about specific policy outcomes, but also makes them better able and motivated to cast a ballot accordingly. This expectation is formalized in the following way:

**Political Sophistication Gap Hypothesis:** *The degree of performance voting increases with higher levels of political sophistication, all else being equal.*

### *2.2.2 How Salience Moderates the Sophistication Gap in Performance Voting*

In this study we also hypothesize that the magnitude of the systematic bias in performance voting due political sophistication might not be constant across elections. Specifically, we expect that the sophistication gap in performance voting is likely to decrease as a factor of the extent to which voters care about a government's performance record in a given policy area. Building on Krosnick's work on issue voting (1988, 1990), we expect salience to offset the informational demands placed on voters when attempting to construct a link between policy outcomes and incumbent support. Let us elaborate this intuition.

One of the core contributions of our study originates from the fact that we examine performance voting beyond the economy. 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.

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 (see also Fournier et al. 2003). From the seminal work of Krosnick (1988, 1990), we know that salience is a key determinant of the degree of issue voting. The reasoning here 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.

In addition, when voters care enough about a policy area, they are likely to become more knowledgeable about that area and more willing and patient to puzzle through complex information in the policy-specific domain (see also McGraw and Pinney, 1990). Voters are more likely to stay informed about government activities and be aware of the possible implications of these actions in the specific policy domain they care about. By consequence, we expect the sophistication gap in performance voting between voters at a high and low level of political sophistication to narrow when the specific policy area is salient to voters. In this case,

the behavior of low sophisticated voters will likely mimic that of the high sophisticates, and citizens with high and low levels of political sophistication will behave similarly when it comes to rewarding or sanctioning incumbents. This reasoning is formalized in the following hypothesis:

**Saliency Hypothesis:** *The sophistication gap in performance voting decreases when the saliency of a policy domain is high, all else being equal.*

We test the empirical validity of our two main hypotheses in the empirical section, but before doing so let us first highlight the data, operationalizations and methods.

### 3 Data, Operationalizations & Method

Following the empirical strategy employed in many economic voting studies, 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 saliency 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 also note two shortcomings of the data 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 informative when considering policy areas beyond the economy. Contrary to the economy, 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. Hence, we only focus on sociotropic performance evaluations. Second, 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, we cannot rule out the possible endogenous relationship between voters' performance evaluations and vote choices that recent studies of economic voting suggest exists (see for example Evans and Pickup, 2010). Given the fact we are mainly interested in moderation effects the endogeneity issue might be less pressing.

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. As it can be argued that within coalition government systems, which is the most frequent form of executive power in the countries included in our analysis, citizens are most likely to hold the Prime Minister (PM) party accountable for policy outcomes as this party holds most power in political decision making, and is likely most visible in media reporting, we ran additional models where voting for the PM party is measured. The results remain robust.

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*.<sup>8</sup> To allow for simple comparisons across issue areas we break down the hundreds 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.<sup>9</sup> These categories reflect the most important policy areas which are cross-nationally comparable.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> When studying the moderating influence of political sophistication, scholars often distinguish between voters’ subjective assessment of political interest and their factual political knowledge (see Baldassarri 2013, Chapter 3.2 for a useful overview). We opt for factual knowledge rather than subjective assessments of political interest as although both variables may tap into a similar 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. This is an important control as it can be argued that political sophisticates are both more likely to be partisans and to strive for greater consistency in responses to surveys (see Zaller 1992).<sup>12</sup>

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 equation takes the following form:

$$\text{Logit } \pi_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \beta_2 Z_{1ij} + \dots + \beta_n X_{nij} + \dots + \gamma_1 Z_{kij} X_{kij} + \mu_{0j}$$

Our model includes individual variables ( $X_{ij}$ , their estimates  $\beta$  respectively), controlling for the non-specified context variance ( $\mu_{0j}$ ). As our theory assumes that an interaction between two individual level variables, we include the interaction term ( $Z_{kij} X_{kij}$ ), its estimate  $\gamma$  respectively. In general, this multilevel model carries the advantage that it decomposes the variance and estimates a separate term for the context variance.<sup>13</sup>

#### 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 about here*

Figure 1 supports this idea. Although the economy is one of the three most important policy areas for voters in 21 out of the 25 countries shown here, only around a quarter of the population in these countries rates this issue as most salient ( 24.9 percent; see the reference line in Figure 1). This leaves about 75 percent of the population deeming other policy areas as

more important. In addition, Figure 1 demonstrates that considerable variation exists in the importance of the economy exists across the countries in our sample. While the economy is with roughly 80 percent by far the most important issue for German voters in the 2002 election, less than 10 percent of British or Japanese voters classified the economy among the top three policy areas in the 2005 and 2004 election respectively. This evidence underlines the importance of studying performance voting not only based on the economy, but more broadly for all policy areas that voters may care about.

*Table 1 about here*

Let us now turn to the evidence regarding our hypotheses. We are interested in the effects of performance evaluations on the vote and the moderating effects of political sophistication and salience. The results of the multilevel logistic regressions focusing on individual heterogeneity in performance voting are shown in Table 1. The effect of the incumbent performance variable is as expected positive and highly significant, providing empirical support for 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. Specifically, the more negative a voter’s evaluation of the incumbent performance record, the lower the probability of incumbent support and vice versa. This finding is robust even when we control for other factors. Overall, the controls behave as expected if they reach significance at all. For example, ideological proximity to the government increases the likelihood of casting a vote for an incumbent party.

The results presented in model 2 explore the extent to which the relationship between performance voting and incumbent support is moderated by the degree of political sophistication among voters. The moderating relationship becomes visible in the interaction and main effects which are statistically significant. The question remains if the level of performance voting is higher among highly sophisticated voters as we expect (see *Political Sophistication Gap 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. Figure 2 displays the marginal effect of political sophistication (measured as difference between the extreme points of the scale) by performance ratings. The graphs show the substantive moderating effect of political sophistication which increases the predicted probability of incumbent vote by about 3 percent as well as an overall increase in performance voting for higher sophisticated, indicated by the upward trend in the marginal effect of political sophistication. These findings support our *Political Sophistication Gap 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.

*Figure 2 about here*

Delving deeper into the relationship between voter characteristics and performance voting, we now turn to the results for salient performance which are displayed in Models 3 and 4. We expect that higher degrees of salience of a policy area offset the sophistication gap in performance voting which we just demonstrated. Precisely, we examine the impact of government performance evaluations on incumbent support when taking into account evaluations of government performance in the policy area that a voter views as the most important for her country. We first examine the effect of salient performance without the interaction with political sophistication (see Model 3). We find a significant positive effect of the salient performance indicator. Indeed, positive evaluations of government performance on salient issues are strongly linked to an increased probability of incumbent vote, and vice versa. Model 4 reports the findings of the moderating effect of political sophistication and salient performance. Comparing the interaction effect in Models 2 and 4, we see that the interaction in the latter model is weaker and non-significant indicating that, as hypothesized (see *Salience Hypothesis*), the sophistication gap decreases when a voter views a policy domain as salient.

Interestingly, we find that while for negative performance ratings no difference exists between high and low sophisticated voters, highly sophisticates do show a slightly higher propensity of using their positive performance evaluations in their vote choice for a policy area they view more important, 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 (2001). Overall, the moderating effect of political sophistication, i.e. the sophistication gap, is very weak for government evaluations based on the most important policy as we hypothesized in the *Saliency Hypothesis*. Nevertheless, while on the basis of our hypothesis we would expect no interaction effect with political sophistication for salient performance, the results displayed in Figure 3 shows that this theoretical expectation finds not complete support in the data. The figure shows that an interaction still exists, yet its effect only applies to very positive performance ratings. These findings support the idea that salience offsets the cognitive demands placed on voters when attempting to link policy performance to incumbent support.

*Figure 3 about here*

## **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 advanced democracies reward or

punish incumbents for policy performance more generally. It replicates the main finding within the economic voting literature to show that voters indeed hold incumbents accountable for past performance, at least within elections between 2002 and 2006 in the 25 advanced democracies included in this study.<sup>14</sup>

This result may lead us to conclude 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. This suggests that the ability of voters to hold governments to account may be weaker than previously assumed (see also Duch 2001). Only 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 results also show that salience partially offsets the informational requirements for performance voting. This may provide some release for proponents of existing electoral configurations. The sophistication gap in performance voting narrows substantially when a policy area is salient for voters suggesting that salience may partially negate the informational costs associated with performance voting. Overall, our findings indicate that our understanding of performance voting benefits greatly from paying more close attention to the psychological roots of heterogeneity among voters.

Interesting avenues for further research remain. 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 and we are mainly interested in moderation effects which makes endogeneity issues less pertinent, 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.

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 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 elites 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.

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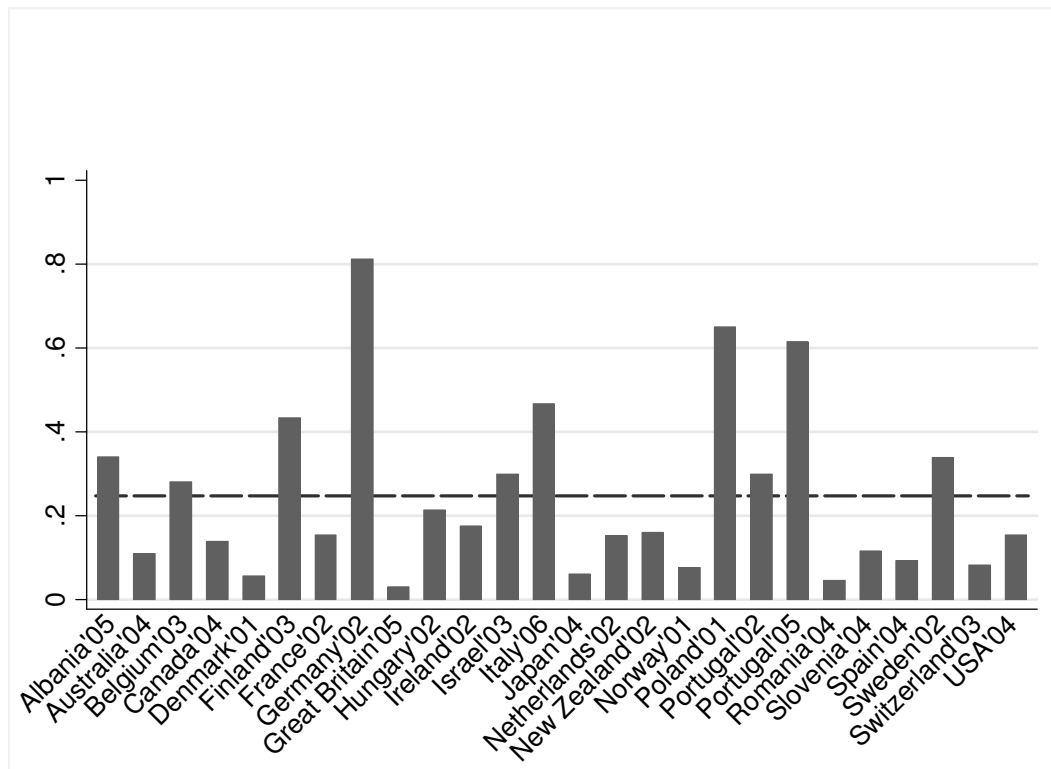
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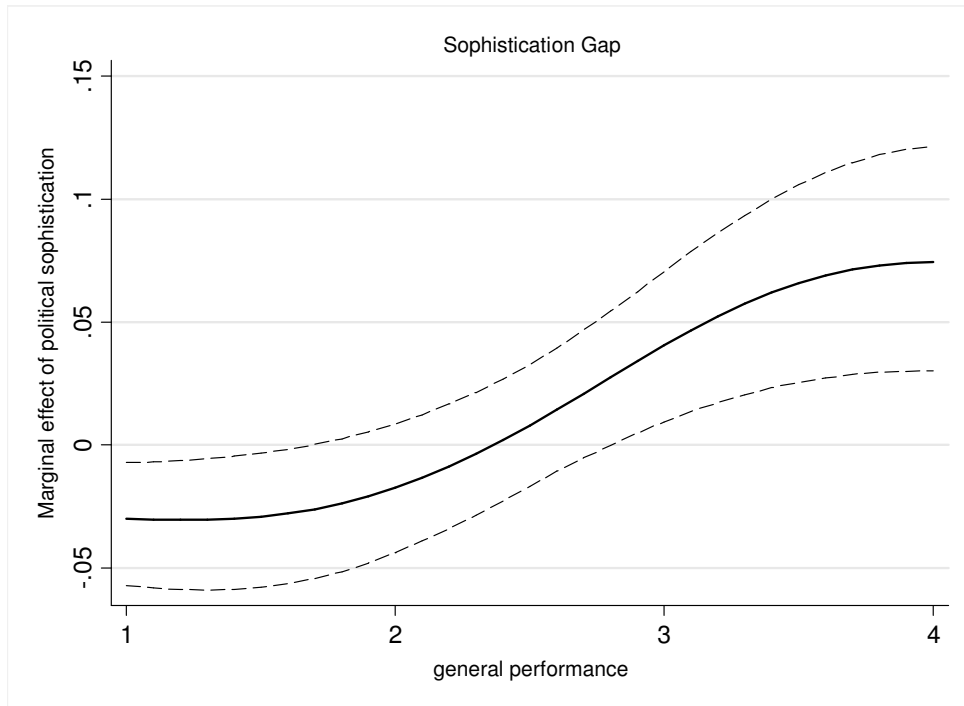
## Tables & Figures

Figure 1: Variation in the salience of the economy



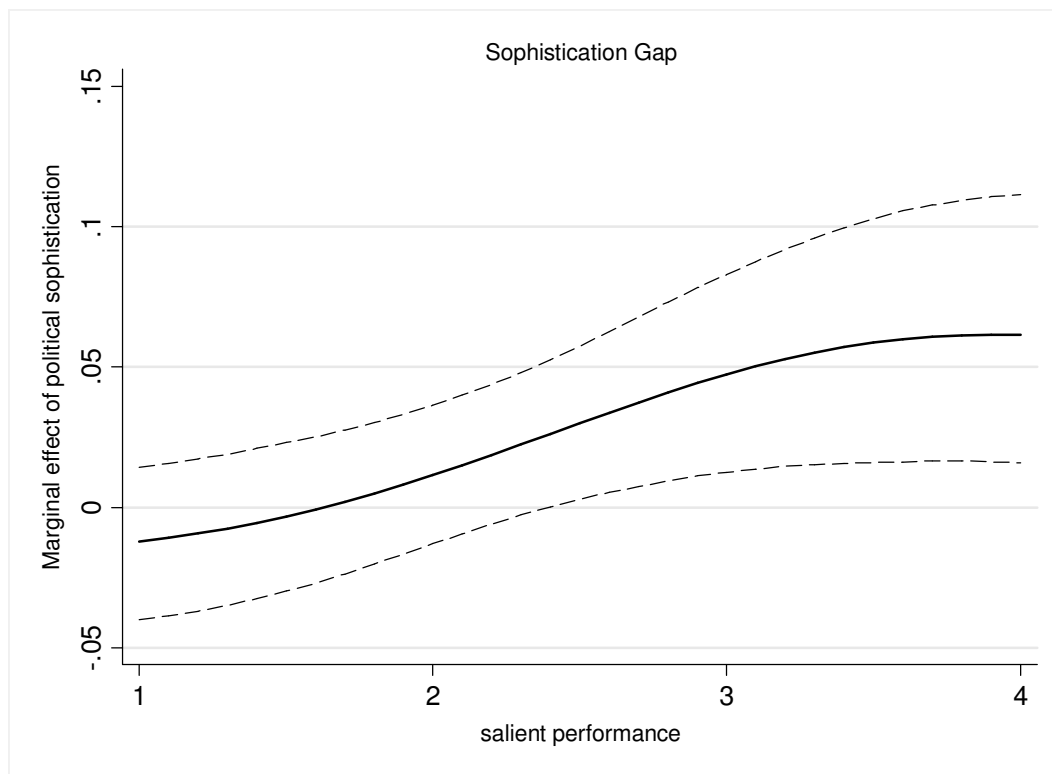
Note: The percentage of citizens indicating that the economy is the most important issue is shown above including the average across all countries in our sample as the mean reference line. More information including a figure of the salience of all 7 issue categories is available in the Supplementary Material.

Figure 2: General performance voting moderated by political sophistication



Note: All other variables at their mean/mode. Low values on the x-axis indicate negative performance evaluations. The marginal effect is calculated from the minimum to the maximum value, shown here are the changes in predicted probabilities.

Figure 3: Salient performance voting moderated by political sophistication



Note: All other variables at their mean/mode. Low values on the x-axis indicate negative performance evaluations. The marginal effect is calculated from the minimum to the maximum value, shown here are the changes in predicted probabilities.

Table 1: Individual heterogeneity in performance voting

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		
<b>FIXED EFFECTS</b>									
Constant	-5.42	0.23 ***	-5.01	0.26 ***	-4.49	0.23 ***	-4.33	0.25 ***	
<b>Individual level</b>									
Gen. Performance	1.22	0.03 ***	1.07	0.05 ***					
Salient Issue Performance					0.96	0.02 ***	0.88	0.05 ***	
Ideological Position	0.32	0.01 ***	0.32	0.01 ***	0.32	0.01 ***	0.32	0.01 ***	
Unemployed	-0.03	0.08	-0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.08	-0.01	0.08	
Age	0.07	0.02 **	0.07	0.02 ***	0.05	0.02 ***	0.05	0.02 **	
Gender	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	
Knowledge	0.01	0.02	-0.22	0.07 **	0.02	0.02	-0.07	0.06	
Gen. Performance*Knowledge			0.09	0.03 ***					
Salient Performance*Knowledge							0.04	0.02	
<b>RANDOM EFFECTS</b>									
individual level variance	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	
Context level variance	0.95	0.28	0.95	0.27	1.01	0.29	1.01	0.29	
Number of cases (election)	21201 (25)		21201 (25)		21201 (25)		21201 (25)		
Log Likelihood	-		-		-10892		-10891		
AIC	10736		10731		21800		21799		
BIC	21488		21479		21864		21871		

Note: \*\*\* significant at  $p < .001$  ; \*\* significant at  $p < .01$ , \* significant at  $p < .05$  (two-tailed). As the reported models are logit models, the individual level variance is assumed and therefore shown as 1 (0).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 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 time-frame), Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Performance voting should therefore be distinguished from issue voting models which are also dominant in 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> We note that an additional criticism of the existing economic voting literature is that the evidence to date may suffer from problems with endogeneity (for a discussion see Evans and Pickup, 2010 or Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Put differently, do voters reward or punish governments, and change their vote choice as a result, or is it perhaps the other way around? Although this study is primarily concerned with establishing the extent to which political sophistication and salience moderate performance voting and the evidence concerning the endogeneity of vote and performance evaluations is mixed, we do take this critique seriously. We note that we control for partisanship in each of our models and the results presented are robust across these different specifications. Please see the Supplementary Material for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Heuristics here are understood as a judgement shortcut allowing voters to simplify political decision making (see Sniderman et al. 1991).

<sup>6</sup>Note that Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2006) present a slightly different conceptualization of the relationship between political sophistication and economic voting. Rather than understanding a ballot choice based on economic evaluations as a process of information acquisition as we do here, they view it as a process of blame attribution. The authors argue that 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. A voter's ability to credit or blame incumbents for past performance hinges on her level of political sophistication. While voters at a low level of sophistication hold those actors responsible for an outcome who are most closely associated with it, i.e. the incumbent, highly sophisticated voters are likely to attribute only partial blame to incumbents as they realize that a government has limited influence over the economy. 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). In the case of national economic performance for example, this is the president or incumbent party. Highly sophisticated voters possess the cognitive ability to make careful responsibility judgments based on what they know or read about politics and the economy. Voters at a low level of political sophistication, on the other hand, cannot make these fine-grained attributions, and will blame the most obvious source for bad economic performance, namely the incumbent. This leads to specific expectations about the way in which political

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sophistication affects sociotropic versus pocketbook voting. 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 are not able to empirically test the extent to which performance evaluations and vote choice are only indirectly linked with blame attribution to the government being the intermediate step and how sophistication moderates these relationships.

<sup>7</sup> In detail, our sample includes national election data between 2002 and 2006 from the 24 countries (see endnote 1 for a detailed list of the countries included). 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 demonstrate that our findings are robust and thus provide evidence for the generalizability of our findings to all industrialized societies. See the Supplementary Material for more information.

<sup>8</sup> We believe that the two measures are comparable as they both refer to the government as the main actor yet distinguish between general performance and performance on a particular policy domain (i.e. the domain most salient to a voter). Empirically, both measures are related, but not particularly high which gives us more confidence in the comparability of the two measures.

<sup>9</sup> While we expect that all policy domains included have a strong valence connotation, some might argue that especially immigration is more a positional issue. We therefore tested whether the results hold without including immigration as a policy domain. This is indeed the case, see Supplementary Material section for more details.

<sup>10</sup> Our categorization has been cross-checked with (Singer 2011) which yields high correlations. See the Supplementary Material section for more details.

<sup>11</sup> 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 the use of education as a third alternative specification of political sophistication, see the Supplementary Material section for more details.

<sup>12</sup> Note that our choice of controls is rather parsimonious as the range of socio-demographic 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.

<sup>13</sup> Please note that while the focus of this study is on individual heterogeneity in performance voting, it is still important and noteworthy to show that our measures of performance voting are moderated by political institutions, and the degree of information needed to decipher who is actually responsible for policy actions. Replicating previous work, we demonstrate in additional models available in the Supplementary Material that performance voting is more extensive if lines of policy responsibility are clear. Further analyses confirm that particularly for lower sophisticated individuals, it becomes increasingly difficult to decipher who is responsible if the institutional clarity is low.

<sup>14</sup> However, comparing the distribution of salience across policy areas with previous findings (see e.g. Aardal and van Wijnen 2005) suggests that our sample is rather typical for the last decades and may not suffer from a possible distortion of very high salience attached to economic issues found in more recent periods. We are more confident that our findings are robust and generalizable.