On the Salience of Political Issues:
The Problem with 'Most Important Problem'*

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Abstract

Salience is an important concept in much political science research. Traditionally, the word has been used to designate the importance of issues, particularly for voters. To measure salience, scholars often rely on people's responses to the survey question that asks about the "most important problem" (MIP) facing the nation. Using this measure, it would appear that the political importance of issues has changed quite dramatically over time and with significant implications for politics and policy. I argue that this literature confuses at least two different characteristics of salience: The *importance* of issues and the degree to which issues are a *problem*. Indeed, it may be that issues and problems are fundamentally different things, one relating to public policy and the other to conditions. It is a simple conjecture based on a simple observation, namely, that the MIP question asks about the most important problems to people, not the importance of issues to them per se.

In the manuscript, I first outline a theoretical model relating the different characteristics of issues and problems. I then undertake an empirical analysis of MIP responses in the US using Gallup poll data between 1945 and 2000. The analysis indicates that most of the variation in MIP responses reflects variation in problem status and not importance. To assess whether these responses actually do capture meaningful information about the variation in importance over time, I turn to an analysis of opinion-policy dynamics, focusing specifically on the defense spending domain. The results indicate that changes in MIP mentions do not structure public responsiveness to policy or policymaker responsiveness to public preferences themselves. Indeed, based on the analysis, it would appear that certain issues have been consistently more important to people than other issues; Only the extent to which there are problems in particular areas has varied meaningfully over time.

Salience is an important concept in much political science research (see the overview in Behr and Iyengar, 1985). The word originally was used by voting behavior scholars to designate the importance individual voters attach to different issues when evaluating political candidates. In effect, greater salience meant greater importance. For the most part, this remains true today. (But do see Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby, 1982.) To measure salience, scholars initially turned to voters' responses to the survey question that asks about the "most important problem" (MIP) facing the nation (Repass, 1974; Miller, Miller, Raine, and Browne, 1976).[1] These responses were taken to indicate the importance of issues to individual voters. This also remains true today (see, e.g., Burden and Sanberg, 2003), though other measures have been tried (see Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Glasgow, 1998; Janowitz, 2002). Scholars have turned to aggregate MIP responses as well, that is, to characterize the broader public salience of issues at particular points in time and over time (see, e.g., McCombs and Shaw, 1972; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Jones, 1994; McCombs and Zhu, 1995; McCombs, 1999; Soroka, 2002). Based on the well-known and growing body of research, the political importance of issues has changed dramatically over time, with meaningful implications for political behavior and policy itself (especially see Jones, 1994).[2]

What I propose in this paper is that research relying on MIP responses confuses at least two very different characteristics of issues—the "importance" of issues and the degree to which they are a "problem"—and that the confusion is rooted in basic measurement. It is a simple conjecture based on a simple observation: The MIP question asks about the most important problems to people, not the importance they attach to issues per se. Consider, for example, the economy. We have reason to believe that the economy is always an important *issue* to voters, but that it is a *problem* only when unemployment and/or inflation are high.

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[1] The exact wording is: What is the most important problem facing the nation today?
[2] Most studies of mass media coverage—predictably, I think—suggest much the same.

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With a good economy, we need to look elsewhere for problems. Give us peace and we have to look further still. This seemingly is by definition given the wording of the survey question itself, which asks about problems. Indeed, it may be that issues and problems are fundamentally different things, one relating to policy and the other to conditions. Of course, people with problems may want a government response, at least in certain areas.

In this manuscript, I do two things. First, relying partly on traditional models of voting behavior, I offer a general conceptualization of an "important issue," an "important problem," and the "most important problem," and outline a model relating these characteristics of issues. This allows for the possibility that problems and issues may be in direction relation to each other: That is, it sets out possibilities that can be settled empirically, not only by assumption. Second, I undertake an empirical analysis of aggregate MIP responses in the US between 1945 and 2000, their time-serial causes and consequences. To begin with, the idea is to explore the degree to which variation in MIP responses over time is due to changes in "problem." Next, to assess whether MIP responses still do capture information about the variation in issue importance over time, I turn to an analysis of opinion-policy dynamics, focusing specifically on the defense spending domain. Based on the results, it appears that MIP responses contain little information about variation in the public importance of the issue over time. Indeed, it appears that the importance of this issue has remained largely unchanged.

Issue Salience in Theory

What is a salient issue? It is customary to write about salience but less common to define it. The standard approach to defining salience is functional. That is, researchers rely on responses to the well-known survey item that asks about the most important problem facing the nation.

These responses, it appears, are salience. If a person says that "the environment" is the most important problem, that issue is salient to the individual. At the very least, it is more salient than all other issues. If the number of people that say "the environment" is the most important problem increases, the general public salience of the issue has increased. If more people say "the environment" than any other issue, it is the most salient issue to the public. But what does the <u>most</u> <u>important</u> <u>problem</u> actually represent? Let us consider its characteristics.

On Importance

An important issue is one that people care about and one on which they have have (meaningful) opinions. These opinions are likely to structure party support and voting behavior (see, e.g., Miller, Miller, Raine and Browne, 1976; Abramowitz, 1994; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996) and form the subject of political debate (Graber, 1989). It follows that people are more likely to pay attention to politicians' behavior on an important issue, as reflected in news media reporting (see, e.g., Brody, 1991) or as communicated in other ways (Ferejohn and Kuklinski, 1990). Politicians, meanwhile, are likely to pay attention to public opinion on the issue. It is in their self-interest to do so, after all. There, thus, are many different expressions of importance.

Perhaps the most formal statement on issue importance comes from the voting behavior tradition in which political judgments are modeled in terms of issue distance. Beginning with Downs (1957), a stream of scholars has relied on the classic spatial model, which posits that an individual's utility is greatest for candidates or parties closest to their own issue positions (see, e.g., Alvarez 1997; Enelow and Hinich 1984; 1989; Enelow, Hinich, and Mendell 1986; Erikson and Romero 1990; Jackson 1975; Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982). For any one particular

political actor and a single issue dimension, the model is straightforward.[3] Specifically, each

individual's utility (U_i) for the political actor, say, the president, is a function of the distance

between each individual's position (S_i) and the president's position (Q):

(1) $U_i = a_o + B \ |S_i - Q|^x + u_i,$

where a_o represents the intercept and u_i is a normally distributed disturbance term that captures

other sources of utility for the president. The effect (B) of distance is expected to be negative, so

that the greater (smaller) the distance between the individual's position and the president's

position, the lower (higher) the utility for the president. The superscript x above the distance term

accounts for the possibility that the effects of distance are non-linear.[4]

Now, individuals may rely on a variety of different issue dimensions when evaluating the

president or any other political actor. In actuality, then, utility is a function of the weighted sum of

distances across various (m) dimensions:

(2) $U_i = a_o + B \ \sum_{j=1}^{m} b_{ij} \ |S_{ij} - Q_j|^x + u_i,$

assuming a common metric across the dimensions. Here, b_{ij} represents the weight (what scholars

typically refer as a *salience* weight) an individual i attaches to each dimension j and the sum of the

weights for each individual equals 1.0.[5] These weights are indicators of importance. They

describe how much different issues matter to people. The aggregate public importance of an issue

j is simply the mean weight (b_j) across individuals i. This is straightforward, at least in theory. It

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[3] The application is very broad, and "political actor" refers to any of a range of individual and institutional actors, e.g., candidates, parties, and government institutions.

[4] Scholars typically assume that the effects of issue distance are linear or else take the form of quadratic loss, so that x equals 1 or 2, respectively. Of course, the exponent can vary across domains and individuals.

[5] Notice in equation 2 (and equation 1) that the position of the political actor in each dimension is a constant across individuals. This is understandable, and reflects the fact that at any point in time the actor's position on a particular issue dimension is fixed, though, of course, there is uncertainty surrounding the position.

is much harder to capture empirically.

An Important Problem

An important problem is different. *It may have nothing at all to do with an "issue" per se.* (More on this below.) Even to the extent it does, it at best captures the importance of an issue *and* the degree to which it is a problem. An issue is a problem if we are not getting the policy we want. For expository purposes, consider a collection of individuals distributed along a dimension of preference for policy, say, spending on defense. This is implied in equations 1 and 2 above. It is not meant to imply that individuals have specific preferred levels of policy in mind, which is difficult to imagine in many policy domains. Rather, the characterization is intended to reflect the fact that individuals differ, where some want more than others. Policy is at some point on the dimension. Now, the greater the distance between what an individual wants (S_i) and policy (Q) itself, the greater the "problem." When the distance is "0," the individual is perfectly happy with the status quo. As $|S_i - Q|$ increases, however, the problem increases.

Although this tells us something about the degree to which an issue is a propblem, it tells us nothing about the issue's importance. It is possible for something to be a problem but of little importance. It also is possible for something to be important but not a problem. Whether something is an "important problem" reflects the combined effect of the two, in effect, the salience weights from equation 2 and the distance from above. Let *I* represent the importance of an issue reflected in the salience weights, b_i. Let *P* represent the degree to which the issue is a problem, $|S_i - Q|$. The interaction between the two, *IP*, captures important problem. The point is basic: Importance and important problem are conceptually different.[6] By our formulation, *IP* at the individual level is essentially equivalent to the term within the summation in Equation 2. That is,

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[6] They nevertheless may be correlated over time, and this possibility is considered below.

$IP_{ij} = b_{ij} |S_{ij} - Q_j|^x$. At the aggregate level, IP_j is the mean of IP_{ij} across individuals i.

This may not apply in all domains, however. A person may have a problem with policy but they also may have a problem with conditions, and there is reason to think that the latter is more typical. We thus can let Q represent any of a range of policies or conditions. Introducing conditions nevertheless raises the possibility of asymmetry with respect to Q. It is hard to imagine that people would have a problem if things are better than they might want or expect, at least in some areas, i.e., that people would conclude that the environment is too clean, that national security is too strong, or that education is too good. On these things and others, a problem is defined only asymmetrically, when conditions are worse than people would like. We may still think the issues are important. We also may reward politicians based on this success. The issues nevertheless wouldn't be considered salient. This further limits the utility of IP. All of this may be interesting; it is relevant here because it helps us conceptualize the most important problem.[7]

The Most Important Problem

In theory, the most important problem (*MIP*) is a clearly defined subset of *IP*. Specifically, it is that issue for which *IP* is greatest. Put formally, $MIP_i = \max\{IP_{ij}\}$. The *MIP* not only combines "importance" and "problem," it is singular. In the aggregate, we simply sum across individuals, so that the public's most important problem represents the plurality *IP* winner. At either level, for any domain d at any point in time, MIP_d is a function of I_d and P_d as well as I_k and P_k, where k designates the set of other domains. Over time, MIP_{dt} is a function of I_{dt}, P_{dt}, I_{kt}, and P_{kt}. MIP_d clearly will vary over time when the importance of the domain changes. It also will vary when the problem status of the domain changes, even if importance remains the same. Even if the importance and problem status of domain d remain unchanged, MIP_d will vary simply

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[7] You may notice that I virtually stop using the word "salience" to refer to importance through the rest of the paper,

because of shifts in the degree to which the *other* issues *k* are important or problems. Give us peace and we need to look elsewhere for our *MIP*. Add in prosperity and we have to look further still. There thus is good reason *a priori* to wonder about the utility of *MIP* as an indicator of importance.[8] Now, let us see how it works in practice. Specifically, let us see whether and to what extent the variation in MIP responses captures variation in the importance of an issue and not its problem status, or the characteristics of other issues altogether.

The Problem with "Most Important Problem" In Practice

Although the foregoing "theory" generalizes across space and time, there are real difficulties in modelling the cross-sectional coordinates of MIP. We just do not have very good subjective or objective indicators of problem status at the individual level. Consider the economy. Some people will say that it is the most important problem and other people will mention something else. How we know whether these differences are due to differences in perceived problem or else importance? We cannot tell given existing data whether one individual has more of a problem with the economy than another. We can tell whether the economy is a bigger problem at one point in time than another, however. That is, there are reasonable over time indicators, both subjective and objective. The same is true in other domains. Thus, the analysis that follows focuses on aggregate MIP responses over time.

The data are for the US and cover the period since World War II. They are from Feeley, Jones, and Larsen (2001), who relied on the complete series of Gallup polls through the early part of 2001.[9] The analysis here focuses specifically on three very general subcategories of MIP

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and this is for expository purposes, that is, to be perfectly clear about what I mean to say.

[8] This logic also would apply to a hypothetical measure of *IP* as well. That is, it the "most" in most important problem is not the critical characteristic.

[9] Data are missing in four years during the period—1949, 1953, 1955, and 1959.

responses, namely, foreign affairs, economic issues, and a catch-all category of all "other" responses. Following the literature, the foreign affairs category includes both "defense-military" issues and "international" ones, though note that there are significant differences between the two subcategories, and these are explored in the analyses that follow. Also following the literature, economic issues are defined narrowly to include macroeconomic concerns, e.g., "inflation," "recession," "unemployment," "the economy," and the like. That is, distributional economic problems are not included within the category.

The measures used here represent percentages of *respondents* (not total responses) offering MIP responses in each category. Simply put, multiple MIP responses provided by respondents are included in the tallies, which means that the sum of responses in a particular year may exceed 100, and often does.[10] Indeed, the total number of mentions varies over time. Using percentages of total *responses* (instead of respondents) as indicators of issue salience will artificially increase the evident interdependence among different categories.[11] This is of obvious importance.

—Figure 1 about here—

Figure 1 plots the basic data. It shows the percentages of respondents offering MIP responses in the three general categories—foreign affairs, the economy, and other—between 1945 and 2000. We can see that MIP responses within the categories vary a lot over time, but it is hard to see much else. In Figure 2, which plots only foreign and economic responses, we can detect more pattern. The foreign policy mentions are large in number early in the series and comparatively low later on. Economic mentions, conversely, are low early on and then increase sharply through the 1970's and into the 1980's, before dropping off sharply, bouncing up in the

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[10] This is of some consequence, particularly if one conceives of MIP responses as issue salience weights. That is, the sum of the weights will exceed 1.0 for some individuals and the public as a whole. Of course, this makes little sense, just as one really can't give 110 percent.

[11] That is, MIP in a particular category Y equals $100 * {}^{Y}MIP_t / {}^{T}MIP_t$. Even assuming that ${}^{Y}MIP_t$ is constant, when ${}^{T}MIP_t$

early 1990's, and then continuing to fall through the end of the series. There thus is some

suggestion of a trade-off between economic and foreign mentions; that is, increases in the one tend

to correspond with decreases in the other. In Figure 3 we can see that mentions of other—non-

foreign, non-economic—problems are low early on, jump abruptly during the 1960's and then

decline fairly consistently through the early 1980's, when the numbers rebound. They explode

through the late 1990's. And there is evidence of interdependence between the combined

economic-foreign responses on the one hand and other MIP responses on the other: Indeed, the

two series are virtual mirror images of each other.

—Figure 2 about here—

Now, let us explicitly address how much of the variation in MIP responses is due to

changes in importance on the one hand and changes in problem status on the other. We can't

easily identify the former, but we can explore the latter. That is, we can measure the variation in

"problem" status over time and assess its covariation with MIP responses. In theory, this would

tell us quite a lot about the variation in importance. It is not a perfect strategy, however, as it may

be that problem and importance are positively correlated over time, i.e., that when something

becomes a problem it also becomes important. It is a useful—and necessary—

first step, as we will see. For the analysis, let us focus only on economic and foreign problems, for

which reasonable instruments can be found. The literature offers little basis for tapping the

variation in "other" problems, at least in any very general way across the many different issues

(see Soroka, 2002).

—Figure 3 about here—

There are various indicators of problems with the economy. This analysis relies on leading

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increases (decreases) the percentage owing to $^Y MIP_t$ will decrease (increase) by definition.

economic indicators (LEI) from the Commerce Department, distributed by The Conference Board. The measure used in the analysis represents the mean annual value of LEI. The measure includes both objective indicators and the important subjective indicator, the Index of Consumer Expectations from the University of Michigan, and offers useful information about both the level and direction of the US economy (see, e.g., Wlezien and Erikson, 1996). It also outperforms measures of coincident and lagging indicators in predicting economic MIP mentions. (See Appendix A.) For expository purposes, the variable is inverted, so high values indicate a bad economy and low values a good one. Thus, the measure should be positively related to economic MIP mentions over time.

There are fewer indicators of problems with foreign policy. In the analysis that follows, net public dislike of Russia is used, drawing on responses to the like/dislike item in the GSS and surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization. These survey responses appear to capture a good portion of the variation in perceived national security threat over time, in effect, the degree to which foreign affairs were a problem in the eyes of the public.[12] It nevertheless does not capture all of the variation in national security over time, and thus permits only a very conservative test. The specific measure represents the percentage of people that dislikes Russia minus the percentage that likes the nation (see Wlezien, 1995; 1996). Unfortunately, the data are available only since 1973, which clearly limits the time frame for our analysis. Note also that the question was asked only in alternate years after 1992, and the value from that year is simply carried forward in the ensuing years.[13] The variable should be positively related to foreign policy MIP mentions over

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[12] That is, they follow standard interpretations of U.S.-Soviet relations over time, marking low relative dislike in the mid-1970's and then tending to erode before reaching a peak of dislike in 1980. The measure levels off during the mid-1980's and drops sharply thereafter. While imperfect, in that it does not incorporate information about national security in general, the measure does capture the apparent threat from the Soviet Union, the primary reliable source of threat to the U.S. over the period.

[13] The question was not included in the 1993 GSS and there was no GSS in 1995, 1997, and 1999. Although carrying

time: When net public of Russia dislike increases, mentions of foreign policy MIP are expected to increase.

—Table 1 about here—

Let us now turn to an analysis of economic and foreign policy MIP responses. Recall that we expect the indicators of actual economic and foreign problems to predict MIP mentions. The results in Table 1 confirm our expectations. That is, MIP responses are meaningfully driven by the degree to which there are problems. The positive significant coefficient for LEI in the first column of the table indicates that when the economy weakens, economic mentions increase. In the second column we can see that the same is true for national security and foreign policy responses. The degree to which the economy and national security are problems structures MIP responses within those areas. This makes perfect sense and is exactly as one would expect given the previous literature (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981, Soroka, 2002).

—Table 2 about here—

Let us now see whether the variation in problem status in one category affects MIP responses in the other categories. To do this, we simply include the measures of both leading economic indicators and Net Dislike into each of the models. We also estimate a parallel model of "other" MIP responses. The results are shown in Table 2. Here it is clear that the degree to which one category is a problem influences mentions of other categories. In the first column, we can see that when economic security worsens, the percentage of respondents naming foreign problems decreases. Interestingly, this effect holds only for "defense/military" mentions and not those of a more general international flavor. See Table 3, which contains the results of estimating the model

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forward the 1992 value may be a less than perfect solution, notice that the coding that results is consistent with the clearly reduced importance of Russian relations to US national security. Linear interpolation makes little difference.

separately for the two categories.[14] Back in Table 2, we can see in the third column that mentions

of other—non-economic, non-foreign—problems shift in the same way. The sum (-1.47) of the

estimated effects of leading economic indicators on foreign and other problems is virtually equal

and opposite to its effect (1.37) on economic mentions. Changes in economic security thus leave

total MIP responses essentially unchanged.

Changes in national security have similar effects on economic and other problems, though

these effects are not highly reliable when the categories are taken separately (see Table 2).

Although the coefficients for net dislike in the first and third columns are appropriately negative,

they are not even close to conventional levels of statistical significance. When economic and other

MIP mentions are taken together, however, the net effect of shifting national security is significant

($p < .05$, one-tailed). The estimated effect on these combined responses is -.17, slightly less in

absolute terms than its effect (.19) on foreign affairs responses in Table 2. As we saw for the

economic security, the effects of changing national security on MIP mentions within the domain

come at the expense of—not in addition to—mentions in other domains.

—Table 3 about here—

The foregoing analysis is important. It indicates that much of the movement in MIP

responses not only is unrelated to changes in importance per se; much is unrelated to changes in

the degree to which the particular domain is a problem. To be perfectly clear, a large part of the

variance in MIP responses within domains reflects the degree to which there are problems in other

domains. Ultimately, it appears that *much of the variance in MIP responses is unrelated to*

variation in importance.

But, what portion of the variance is due to changes in importance? It is fair—indeed,

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[14] Purely "international" problems are completely unrelated to variation in our indicators of either national or
economic security. Presumably, variation in these problems evidently is largely exogenous to the system.

appropriate—to wonder. The problem is that we can't tell for sure. However, based on the foregoing models, we can estimate the amount in each category that is due to variance in problem status, both within and without each category. In one sense, the remaining, residual variance constitutes an upper-bound estimate of the variance that is due to changing importance. Indeed, the estimate seems a quite liberal one because it contains basic sampling (and other survey) error as well as unmeasured variation in problem status. The estimate actually could be a conservative one though, as it may be that the variance attributed to changes in problem status partly capture changes in importance, as noted above. These possibilities can be to some extent addressed in the analyses of defense spending opinion and policy that follow. Estimating the proportion of variance that is unrelated to our indicators of problem variation provides useful and directly relevant information. To generate the number for each category, it is necessary to first reestimate the equations in Table 2 (and Table 3) excluding the lagged dependent variables, which may contain information unrelated to problem status.[15] The results of this analysis of variance are shown in Table 4.

—Table 4 about here—

In the table it is clear that most of the variance in MIP responses reflects changes in our basic indicators of problem status. The first column shows the variance of MIP responses in the different categories—economic, foreign, and other. The second column reports the variance explained by the basic indicators of economic and national security used above. The third column shows the residual and the final column the percentage of the total variance that is residual. The two indicators account for just over 77 percent of the variance in economic MIP responses and about 55 percent of foreign affairs mentions (58 percent for "defense"). Approximately 68 percent

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[15] Including lags of the problem status indicators makes no significant difference to the analyses. All of these results are available on request.

of the variance in non-economic, non-foreign MIP is predicted by our indicators of economic and

national security. This puts in perspective—and makes more understandable—the stunning rise in

"other" MIP, e.g., education and drugs and crime, through the 1990's (and the subsequent drop in

2001 and 2002). Of course, nontrivial portions of variance remain in each of the three broad

categories. They may be the simple result of survey error. They may reflect unmeasured variation

in problem status, either real or perceived. The possibility remains that the residual variance in

MIP responses actually is due to changing importance of the domains. We can begin to explore

these possibilities.

MIP Responses and Importance?

The foregoing analyses reveal potential problems with using aggregate MIP responses as

indicators of the importance of issues or even important problems. Most of the variance reflects

changes in problem status within domains and in other domains. Still, it is important to not

overdraw the conclusion, for at least two reasons that have already been noted. First, there is

surplus variance, and it may be that this to some extent reflects change in issue importance.

Second, it may be that some of the variance we have attributed to changes in problem status

reflects changes in importance, i.e., that problem and importance are positively correlated over

time. Let us consider these possibilities, loosely following Jones' (1994) logic. That is, let us

consider whether changes in MIP mentions structure opinion-policy dynamics: both policymaker

responsiveness to public preferences and public responsiveness to policy itself. As Jones has

argued, policymakers may be more likely to notice and pay attention to public opinion for policy

in a particular area when the public views that issue as important.[16] Likewise, following Franklin

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[16] This reflects the now classic perspective. See, e.g., McCrone and Kuklinski, 1979; Geer, 1996; Hill and Hurley, 1998.

and Wlezien (1997), the public may be more responsive to policy change on important issues. If MIP responses capture variation in importance, therefore, we should expect that policymakers will be more responsive to public opinion and/or that the public will be more responsive to policy behavior itself when MIP is high. It is useful to be more specific about these expectations, using the thermostatic model of opinion and policy.

A Model of Opinion-Policy Dynamics, Including MIP

The basic thermostatic model (Wlezien, 1995; 1996) implies that policymakers respond to public preferences for policy change and that the public, in turn, adjusts its preferences in response to what policymakers do. To begin with, the public's preference for 'more' or 'less' policy—its relative preference, R—represents the difference between the public's preferred level of policy (P^*) and the level it actually gets (P). Thus, as the preferred level of policy or policy itself changes, the relative preference signal changes accordingly. The public is expected to respond currently to actual policy change when put into effect. This is straightforward, at least in theory. It is less straightforward in practice.

Most importantly, we typically do not directly observe P^* over time. With some exceptions, survey organizations do not ask people how much policy they want. Instead, these organizations ask about relative preferences, whether we are spending "too little," whether spending should "be increased," or whether we should "do more." The public preference, however defined, also is necessarily relative. In one sense, this is quite convenient, as we can actually measure the thermostatic signal the public sends to policymakers. Because we must rely on instruments to estimate P^*—and because metrics of the other variables differ—it is necessary to rewrite our (implicit) equation from above as follows:

(3) $\Delta R_t = a_0 + \beta_1 \Delta \hat{P}_t^* + \beta_2 \Delta P_t + e_t,$

where $\hat{P}_t^*$ is the public's *predicted* preferred level of policy. The coefficient β_2 is expected to be less than 0.

Now, if policymakers respond to public preferences, *changes* in policy (P) will be associated with *levels* of the public's relative preference (R). We can express this expectation as follows:

(4) $\Delta P_t = a_1 + \gamma_1 R_{t-1} + \gamma_2 Z_{t-1} + e_t,$

where Z represents the set of other determinants of policy. The coefficient γ_1 captures responsiveness, where the effect of preferences on policy is independent of other factors; if the coefficient is greater than 0, policy "responds" to preferences.[17]

These expectations are general ones and we do not expect the model to apply in all policy domains. Indeed, public and policy responsiveness is likely to reflect the political importance of the different domains (Wlezien, 2004). We can explicitly model these possibilities as follows, where I designates importance:

(5) $\Delta R_t = a_0 + \beta_1 \Delta \hat{P}_t^* + \beta_2 \Delta P_t + \beta_3 I_t + \beta_4 I_t \Delta P_t + e_t$

and

(6) $\Delta P_t = a_1 + \gamma_1 R_{t-1} + \gamma_2 Z_{t-1} + \gamma_3 I_{t-1} + \gamma_4 I_{t-1} R_{t-1} + u_t.$

Notice that these equations are generalized forms of equations 3 and 4 and that the effects of *I* are modeled both additively and interactively. In theory, the effects are interactive, e.g., the influence of policy (*P*) on preferences (in equation 5) should *depend* on the level of *I*. Thus, we are most

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[17] This does not mean that politicians actually respond to changing public preferences, for it may be that they and

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interested in whether the interactive variables in equations 5 and 6 have significant effects. That is, we want to know whether the B_4 is less than 0 and γ_4 is greater than 0, which would tell us that the level of I influences either public or policymaker responsiveness. In the extreme, responsiveness would depend entirely on I and B_2 and γ_1 would equal 0.

Of course, we do not have a direct measure of I, and we want to see whether the measure MIP contains relevant information, as many scholars suppose. This is straightforward, as we can use MIP as our measure of I in equations 5 and 6 and assess the parameters B_4 and γ_4. As we already have seen, however, MIP responses capture variation in problem status. It may be that this variation is highly correlated with importance over time, in which case simply using MIP would be appropriate. It also may be that this variation is largely uncorrelated with changes in importance over time, in which case using MIP would not be right. A more appropriate specification then would be to include only the variation in MIP that is due to variation in importance per se. Consider MIP* to be the variation in MIP *purged* of the variation due to changing problem status, both within the particular domain and other domains, from Table 4. To see whether it matters, we simply substitute MIP* for I in equations 5 and 6. We can see what happens when we do.

An Expository Empirical Analysis

For this analysis, consider the interrelationships between public preferences and policy change in a single domain—spending on defense in the U.S. The decision reflects a variety of considerations. First, and most importantly, we know a good amount about defense MIP from the foregoing analysis. This is of obvious significance given the theoretical model outlined above.

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the public both respond to something else. All we can say for sure is that the coefficient (γ_1) captures policy responsiveness in a statistical sense, that is, whether and the extent to which public preferences directly influence policy change, other things being equal.

Second, we have good data on defense spending decisions and public spending preferences themselves over a reasonable time period, 1973-1994. Third, the thermostatic model appears to work quite well in the domain. That is, there is strong evidence of public responsiveness to policy and policymaker responsiveness to preferences (Wlezien, 1996). It thus makes sense to ask: Does this evident representation and feedback vary with MIP? Let us begin with the public itself.

An Analysis of Public Responsiveness to Policy

The basic model of public preferences follows Wlezien's previous research. The dependent variable is the difference in net support for spending, where net support is the percentage of people who think we are spending "too little" minus the percentage of people who think we are spending "too much." Thus, as noted above, the measure taps relative preferences. The data are based on responses to the standard question:

> Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on [the military, armaments, and defense]?

The General Social Survey (GSS) has asked this battery of items in every year between 1973 and 1994, with the exception of 1979, 1981, and 1992. Fortunately, Gallup asked the same question in those years. Since 1994, data are available only in alternate years, which clearly limits our analysis. From these data, we nevertheless can construct annual time series of public preferences for spending that cover 1973-1994.

Recall that the thermostatic model implies that the public's relative preference for spending represents the difference between the public's preferred level of spending and spending itself. It is easy to measure spending, which we can draw from the *Budget of the United States Government*; following equation 3, we use the first difference in real dollar-valued appropriations for defense.[18]

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[18] Real dollar values are calculated by dividing current dollar values into the gross national product implicit price deflator (1987=1.00), from *The National Income and Product Accounts*.

As we do not have a measure of the public's preferred level of spending, it is necessary to rely on instruments. For this analysis, we use the measure of net dislike of Russia from our earlier analyses of MIP, as it has been shown to powerfully predict variation in preferences for defense spending in the US (Wlezien, 1995; 1996). The pattern indicates that the measure nicely captures the real or perceived national security threat during the period.

The results of estimating this basic model are shown in the first column of Table 5.[19] Here we can see that changes in net support are positively related to changes in Net Dislike: When dislike of Russia increases, support for more spending increases. We also can see that changes in net support are negatively related to changes in appropriations: When appropriations increase, support for more spending decreases. These patterns are already known.

—Tables 5 about here—

Now, let's see whether MIP responses add any additional information. To begin with, let us estimate equation 5 using raw defense MIP mentions. The results of this analysis are shown in the second column of Table 5. Notice first that the coefficient for the additive MIP variable actually is positive, though too unreliable to credit. More importantly, the coefficient for the interactive variable is "0." The performance of this model is lower, as can be seen from the adjusted *R*-squared, which goes down, and the mean squared error, which goes up. Thus, we are better off *not* including MIP in the model. This is an important result: It implies that defense MIP responses do not capture the variation in the importance of the defense-related issues.

As noted above, however, there is another perhaps more appropriate way to capture the information in MIP responses. Our analyses have shown us that the variation in defense MIP responses to a large extent is due to changes in national and economic security over time. This

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[19] The model also includes a control for the Iraq-Kuwaiti crisis in 1991-1992.

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variation reflects the degree to which foreign policy (and the economy) is a problem, and it may be that the variation is unrelated to changes in importance. The remaining variation in MIP responses may be due to changing importance. It thus may be more appropriate to model the effects of this "residual" portion of MIP responses instead of the whole. This is fairly easy to do. That is, we can use the residuals from the analysis summarized in Table 4. To be absolutely clear, the residuals are from the regression of defense MIP on net dislike and leading economic indicators.[20] The results of substituting this "purged" measure for raw MIP in our analysis of public preferences are shown in the third column of Table 5.

These results differ somewhat from those using the raw measure of MIP. That is, the additive effect of MIP* is negative and the interactive effect positive. The latter runs completely contrary to our expectations and also is not statistically significant. The results are telling: To the extent MIP responses capture variation in importance, it seems clear that the importance of the defense domain remained essentially unchanged during the period, at least in the public's mind. Let us now consider whether this also is true for policymakers in their response to public opinion itself.

An Analysis of Policymaker Responsiveness to Public Preferences

The model of spending policy also follows Wlezien's research. The dependent variable represents the first difference of real dollar-valued appropriations (in billions of 1987 dollars) for defense. The independent variables include the party of the president, the party composition of Congress, and a measure of net support for defense spending. Given that the measure of net support captures relative preferences, changes in appropriations are expected to be positively

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[20] The estimated equation is as follows:

Defense $MIP_t = 6.39 + .23$ Net Dislike$_t$ - .57 Leading Economic Indicators$_t$,
R-squared= .61; Adjusted R-squared=.58; Mean squared error=5.08.

related to the levels of net support for spending. Politicians are expected to respond currently. In the budgetary context, this means that the change in appropriations for fiscal year *t* follows the level of net support in year *t*-1, when the bulk of appropriations for fiscal year *t* are made.

As noted above, measures of the party of the president and the party composition of Congress also are included in the models. The former variable takes the value "1" under Democratic presidents and "0" under Republican presidents, and the latter variable represents the average percentage of Democrats in the House and Senate. As for net support, these political variables are measured during year *t*-1. Thus, the analysis that follows relies on a very simple model that includes the party of the president, the party composition of Congress, and the measure of public preferences for spending.[21]

The results from estimating the original model are shown in the first column of Table 6. Here we see that changes in appropriations do closely follow public preferences for defense spending over time. As indicated by the positive, significant coefficient for net support, when public support for more defense spending is high, politicians tend to provide more defense appropriations. Defense appropriations also reflect the party affiliation of the president. Based on the coefficient in Table 6, the change in defense appropriations is about 11 billion (1987) dollars higher under Republican presidents than under Democratic presidents, *given public preferences*. The Congressional composition has no effect, however.

— Table 6 about here —

Now, let us see what MIP responses add. To begin with, let us estimate equation 6 using the raw measure of defense MIP, the results of which are shown in the second column of Table 6. Notice that the coefficient for the important interactive variable is appropriately positive but does

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[21] The model also includes a control for the Iraq-Kuwaiti crisis in 1992

not approach conventional levels of statistical significance. Adding the MIP variables, moreover, actually reduces model performance. As we saw with public responsiveness, it appears that raw MIP responses offer little additional information to our understanding of policy, that is, above and beyond what is reflected in public policy preferences. Analysis using the purged MIP variable (MIP*) is more promising, as can be seen in the third column of Table 6. Here, the effect of the interactive variable borders on statistical significance ($p = .07$, one-tailed).

The last result is suggestive about the effect of importance. Notice first that the result implies that importance and problem status are not highly correlated over time. That is, the "purged" MIP* measure outperforms the raw MIP measure. That the interactive coefficient borders on statistical significance also implies that MIP responses may capture something meaningful about the public importance of issues, at least as perceived by policymakers. (We should not forget, after all, that MIP responses had absolutely no effect on the public's responsiveness to policy change.) As we more fully control for the variation in problem status, we may see more clearly the variation in importance. The variation nevertheless is small, at least when compared with that due to changing problem status. Recall from Table 4 that our very basic measures of defense and economic problem status already account for approximately 60 percent of the variance in defense MIP; A more complete accounting would only increase the percentage. It thus would appear that the importance is *at best* a comparatively small part of the variance of defense MIP over time. This may be true for other issues as well.

Concluding Thoughts

One might think that an important issue is salient by definition. This is not the case given traditional measurement, which relies on responses to questions about the "most important

problem" facing the nation. Whether an issue is an "important problem" to the public is a function of importance *and* the degree to which it is a problem. The most important problem, in turn, is just that, the plurality important problem winner. At best, then importance and measured salience are two related, but different things. At worst, problems and issues are two fundamentally different things, one about conditions and the other about policy. The foregoing analyses indicate that most important problem responses are largely driven by problem status; indeed, a large part of the variation in particular categories reflects the degree to which *other* things are problems! These responses simply tell us little, if anything, about the importance of issues. This is not surprising; it actually may seem obvious. Scholars nevertheless continue to use these responses to indicate importance. This practice is mistaken.

All of this is not to say that the importance of issues does not change over time. But how does one measure this changing importance? It is not straightforward capturing current changes let alone those that have passed us by. As for the future, one possibility is to simply ask people about the importance of different issues. This has been and is being tried and, while some progress is being made, the answer remains elusive.[22] We don't have to ask people, however. We can observe their behavior. This is of obvious relevance when trying to characterize the past, that is, where new innovations in question wording are of no use. We have learned a lot from studies of voting behavior and election outcomes, both at particular points in time and over time (Asher, 1992; Abramowitz, 1994; Claggett and Shafer, 2003; also see Stokes, 1966). Certain issues have mattered quite consistently, such as the economy. Other issues also have mattered, such as national security and social welfare in the US.[23] Similar patterns are evident in the public's

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[22] See Janowitz's (2002) interesting analysis.

[23] Note that MIP mentions of welfare are very rare. Although the issue clearly is important to voting and elections in the US, it just doesn't qualify as an important problem. As noted above, this further limits the utility of MIP responses.

responsiveness to policy in different issue areas over time and politicians' responsiveness to public preferences themselves (Wlezien, 1995; 2004). Diagnostics of the time-constancy of parameters are confirming.[24] Although these results may not tell us everything about the importance of issues, they do tell us a lot. Based on this research, it appears that certain issues are more important to people, on average, than other issues and that this has been true for some time; Only the extent to which they are problems has changed in meaningful ways. Yet we also have learned from this research that new issues can appear, e.g., abortion in the US. It's not that abortion has become a problem; rather, it's that the issue has become more important. This change in importance is clear in analysis of voting behavior (Alvarez and Nagler, 1998).[25] It just is not evident from mentions of most important problem.

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[24] For instance, one can reestimate the model of defense spending using separate measures of net support for three- (or four-) year segments of the sample and then use basic Chow tests to assess equality of the separate coefficients. Doing so for defense spending preferences and policy indicates that public and policymaker responsiveness do not vary significantly over time. Of course, there are other more sophisticated statistical techniques, including flexible least squares (Wood, 2000).

[25] Obviously, connections to voting behaviour are strong indicators of issue importance, as they require differences in candidate or party positions. If candidates and parties do not differ, issues only could structure judgments of these political actors, not vote choice itself.

Appendix A: How the Economy Matters

Table A1. A Diagnosis of Economic Effects, 1973-2000

Independent Variable	Economic MIP Responses		
Intercept[a]	19.83*	31.69**	35.00**
	(11.41)	(8.26)	(1.10)
MIP_{t-1}	0.68**	0.50**	0.47**
	(0.17)	(0.13)	(0.11)
Lagging Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	1.19	---	---
	(.98)		
Coincident Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	---	.61**	-.61
		(.17)	(0.41)
Leading Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	---	---	2.25**
			(0.70)
R-squared	.67	.77	.84
Adjusted R-squared	.65	.75	.82
Standard Error	12.85	10.70	9.11
Durbin-Watson	1.62	1.72	1.85

$N = 28$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

  Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

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Figure 1: Aggregate Most Important Problem Responses, 1945-2000
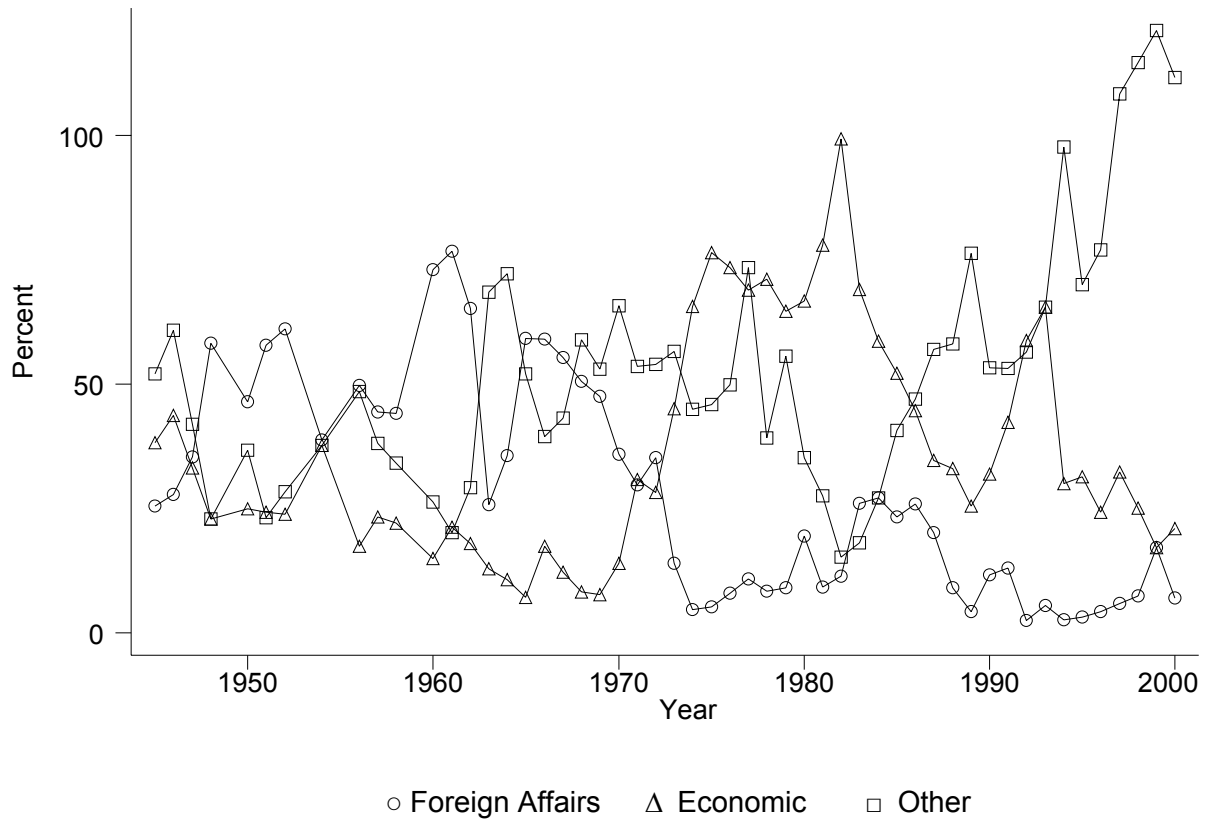
Figure 2: Aggregate Most Important Problem Responses, 1945-2000

○ Foreign Affairs   △ Economic
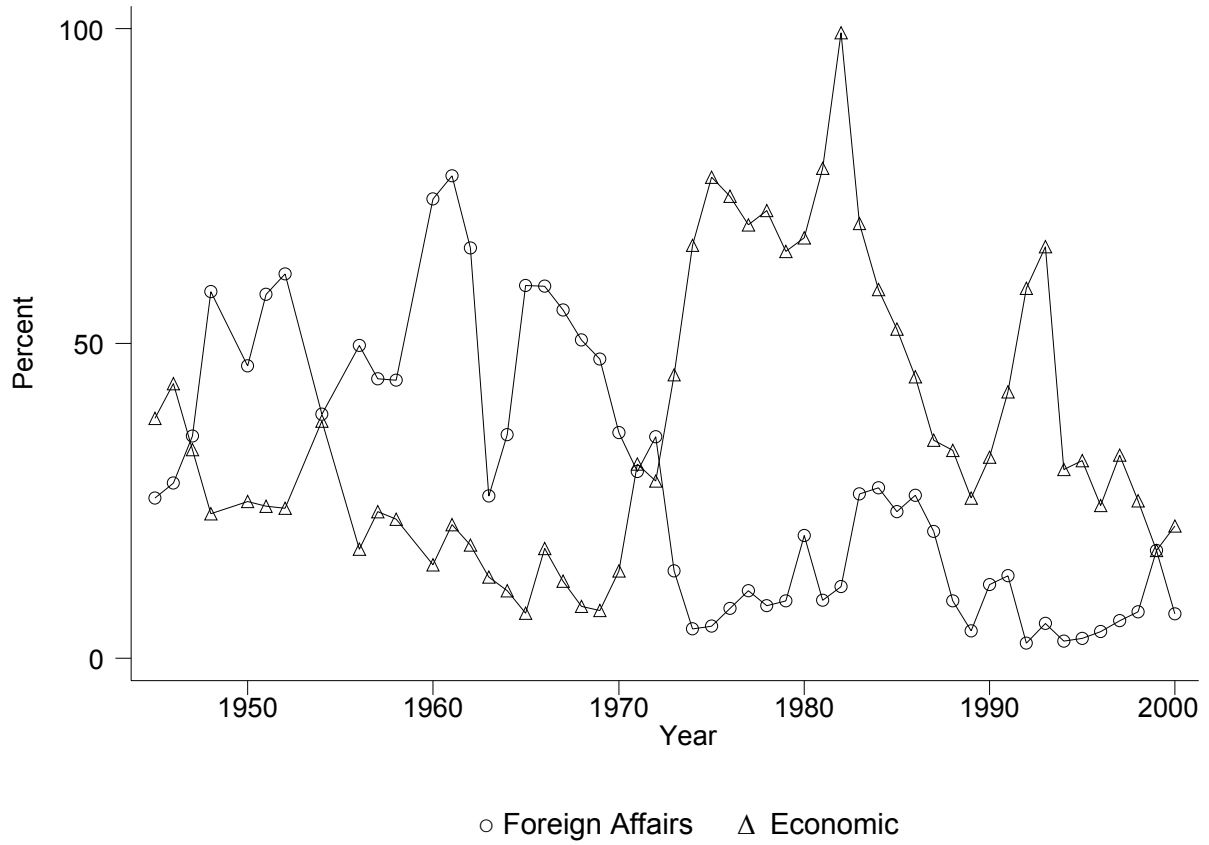
Figure 3: Aggregate Most Important Problem Responses, 1945-2000

○ Foreign and Economic   △ Other
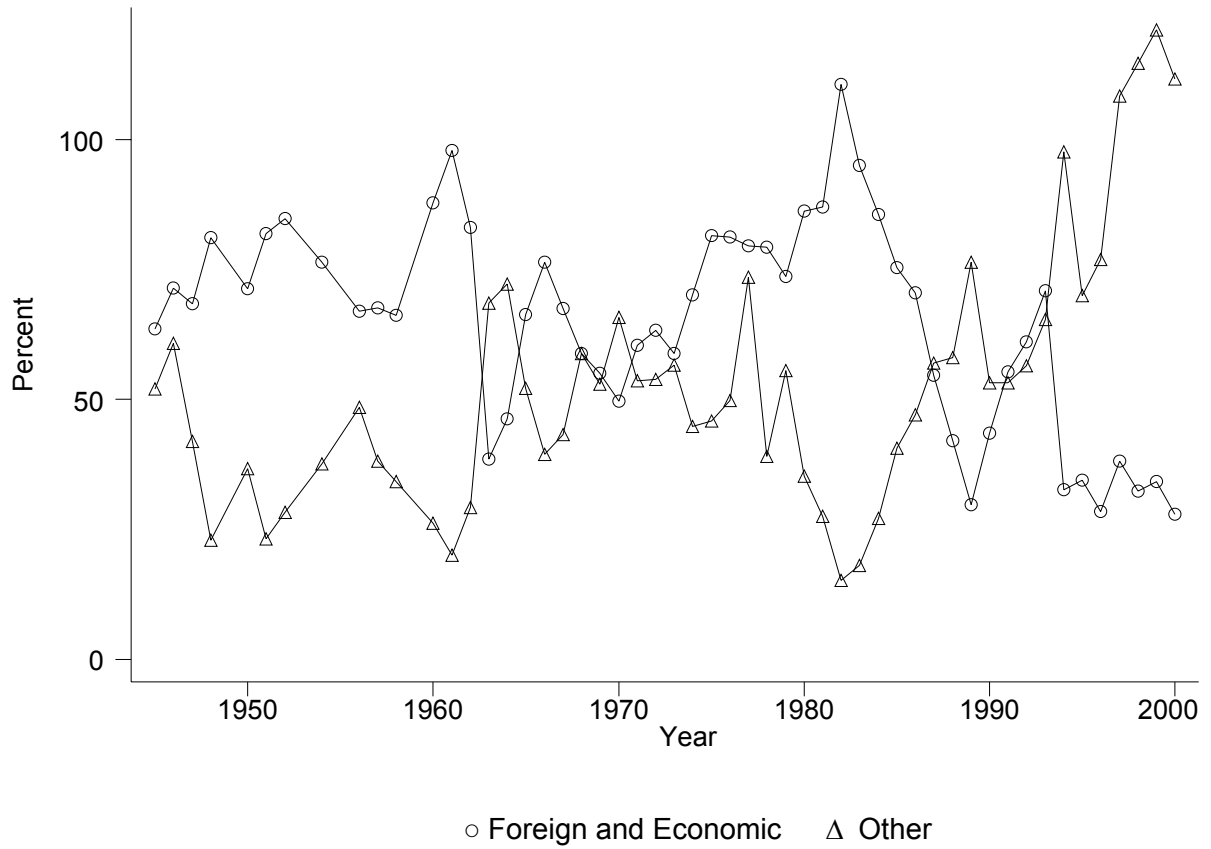
Table 1. A Preliminary Analysis of Economic and Foreign Policy MIP
Responses, 1973-2000

| | MIP Mentions (Percentage of Respondents) | |
Independent Variable	Economic	Foreign
Intercept[a]	36.46** (7.22)	8.44** (2.25)
Economic$_{t-1}$	0.44** (0.11)	---
Foreign$_{t-1}$	---	0.34* (0.14)
Leading Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	1.27** (.25)	---
Net Dislike of Russia$_t$	---	0.08* (.03)
R-squared	.83	.47
Adjusted R-squared	.81	.43
Standard Error	9.34	5.70
Durbin-Watson	1.79	1.50

$N = 28$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

 Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

[a] Intercepts reflects the effects of the mean values of Leading Economic
 Indicators and Net Dislike of Russia.

Table 2. An Analysis of Interdependence among MIP Responses,
    1973-2000

Independent Variable	MIP Mentions (Percentage of Respondents)		
	Economic	Foreign	Other

Independent Variable	Economic	Foreign	Other
Intercept[a]	33.99** (8.18)	8.36** (1.90)	20.86* (7.93)
Economic$_{t-1}$	0.49** (0.13)	---	---
Foreign$_{t-1}$	---	0.22 (0.12)	---
Other$_{t-1}$	---	---	0.53** (0.15)
Leading Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	1.37** (.30)	-.51** (.15)	-.96* (0.45)
Net Dislike of Russia$_t$	-.05 (.08)	0.19** (.04)	-.12 (0.11)
R-squared	.83	.64	.79
Adjusted R-squared	.81	.60	.76
Standard Error	9.45	4.80	14.10
Durbin-Watson	1.87	1.98	2.20

$N = 28$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

[a] Intercepts reflects the effects of the mean values of Leading Economic
   Indicators and Net Dislike of Russia.

Table 3. On the Structure of "Foreign Affairs" Responses, 1973-2000

Independent Variable	MIP Mentions (Percentage of Respondents)	
	Defense	International
Intercept[a]	-.16 (1.12)	4.15** (1.35)
Defense$_{t-1}$	0.43** (0.09)	---
International$_{t-1}$	---	0.16 (0.20)
Leading Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	-.44** (.11)	.01 (.11)
Net Dislike of Russia$_t$	0.16** (.03)	-.01 (.03)
R-squared	.81	.05
Adjusted R-squared	.78	-.07
Standard Error	3.64	3.64
Durbin-Watson	1.59	1.98

$N = 28$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Table 4. Changes in Problem Status and Variance of MIP Responses, 1973-2000

Category	Total Variance	Predicted Variance	Residual Variance	Percent Residual
Economic	466.6	342.7	123.9	22.6
Foreign Affairs	57.2	34.0	23.2	45.0
Defense	61.3	37.4	23.6	42.0
Other	822.1	557.4	264.7	31.6

Table 5. Defense Spending Preference Regressions, 1974-1995[a]

Independent Variable[b]	Basic	With MIP	With MIP*
Intercept	3.56*	3.45*	4.13**
	(1.82)	(1.98)	(1.56)
Net Dislike of the Soviet Union$_t$ (differenced)	0.51**	0.53**	0.48**
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.14)
Net Dislike of the Soviet Union$_{t-1}$ (differenced)	0.39**	0.41**	0.42**
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.14)
Defense Appropriations$_t$ (differenced)	-.68**	-.72**	-.92**
	(0.13)	(0.21)	0.26)
Defense MIP$_t$	---	0.16	---
		(0.25)	
Defense Appropriations$_t$ (differenced) * Defense MIP$_t$	---	0.00	---
		(0.02)	
Defense MIP$^*_t$	---	---	-.14
			(0.45)
Defense Appropriations$_t$ (differenced) * Defense MIP$^*_t$	---	---	0.03
			(0.03)
R-squared	.75	.75	.77
Adjusted R-square d	.67	.63	.65
Standard Error	7.84	8.25	8.08
Durbin-Watson	2.03	1.95	1.73

N=22, * p<.05, ** p<.01 (one-tailed)

Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

[a] Results are based on estimated models that include controls for the Kuwait-Iraq crisis.

[b] All independent variables are mean-centered.

Table 6. Defense Appropriations Regression, Fiscal Years 1974-1995,
in Billions of 1987 Dollars[a]

Independent Variable[b]	Basic	With MIP	With MIP*
Intercept	11.38**	11.48**	16.55**
	(2.80)	(3.01)	(4.28)
Democratic President$_{t-1}$	-11.00*	-10.96*	-10.60*
	(5.26)	(5.55)	(5.11)
Democratic Composition of Congress$_{t-1}$	-.21	-.11	-.42
	(0.53)	(0.64)	(0.56)
Net Support for Defense Spending$_{t-1}$	0.66**	0.66**	0.85**
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.19)
Defense MIP$_{t-1}$	---	0.23	---
		(0.44)	
Net Support$_{t-1}$ * Defense MIP$_{t-1}$	---	0.02	---
		(0.03)	
Defense MIP$^{*}_{t-1}$	---	---	0.56
			(0.77)
Net Support$_{t-1}$ * Defense MIP$^{*}_{t-1}$	---	---	0.05
			(0.03)
R-squared	.74	.74	.78
Adjusted R-squared	.68	.64	.70
Standard Error	8.50	8.93	8.23
Durbin-Watson	1.95	2.12	2.47

N=22, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$ (one-tailed)

Note: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

[a] Results are based on estimated models that include a control for the Kuwait-Iraq crisis in fiscal year 1992.

[b] All independent variables are mean-centered.