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A Policy-Oriented Electorate: Evaluations of Candidates and Parties in the Obama Elections Compared to the 1952-1980 Period

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In a replication of Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) coding of American National Election Studies open-ended likes/dislikes questions, respondents' evaluations of candidates and parties are found to be especially policy oriented in 2008 and 2012. Compared to earlier elections without an incumbent, prospective policy evaluations were far more prevalent in 2008. Furthermore, voters' comments about the candidates in 2012 were more policy oriented than the elections of 1964 and 1972 in which challengers offered a stark policy choice to an incumbent president. We also find the public's likes and dislikes of the political parties focused heavily on policy considerations in the two Obama elections.

It is often said after an election that *the people have spoken* and scholars regularly debate what they have said. This article replicates Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) framework for analyzing what Americans said about the candidates and parties, using the transcripts from the 2008 and 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES).¹ We revisit the question of how voters frame their discussion of candidates and parties employing data from the Obama era. Our findings reveal remarkable changes since the time of the publication of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). Whereas American voters once focused on results produced by the government, in the Obama elections they were much more inclined to try to guide future policies.

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1. All of the data used in this project is publicly available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/series/3>.

First, we describe the primary research question examined in this project and the expectations we have of the data. Next, we explain our sources of data, outlining the advantages and disadvantages of using open-ended data and the coding scheme. We then present our findings regarding candidate and party evaluations. Our emphasis in these sections is on the proportion of different types of evaluations, and we also assess whether respondents were considering candidates and parties in retrospective or prospective terms. We find that respondents' evaluations of both candidates and parties were far more policy oriented in the Obama elections of 2008 and 2012 than they were in the 1952-80 period. Finally, we examine and present voters' rationales and investigate who is most oriented toward policy arguments.

Research Question and Expectations

There have been many changes in the political landscape since 1980, and we investigate whether evaluations of candidates and parties during the Obama elections show change as well. Contributing primarily to the voting and campaign literature, our findings will show whether rationales are the same or distinct from previous elections. We hypothesize policy evaluations to play a greater role in 2008 and 2012 than in the years Miller and Wattenberg coded for a variety of reasons.

To begin, the composition of the electorate has changed significantly since the 1980s due to generational replacement. Of the voting age population in 2012, 56% were not old enough to have been eligible to vote back in 1980. Newer entrants into the electorate have been socialized in a much more polarized environment with regard to policy, as will be discussed below. In addition, they have acquired far more education than the people they have replaced. The greater level of education attained by today's electorate gives more people the ability to absorb advanced concepts, such as policy stands, as opposed to making a simple assessment of whether the nation is better or worse off (Abra-jano 2005; Dalton 2008, chap. 1).

Furthermore, political elites have made learning about policies easier for all voters by sorting themselves into partisan camps that now clearly differ according to many policy stands. While there is much disagreement as to whether or not the electorate has become more ideologically polarized (Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina 2010), there is consensus that party elites have *sorted* themselves to present clear and consistent differences between the presidential nominees, as well as most congressional candidates (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009). Whereas clearly conservative nominees, such as Barry Goldwater in 1964, or clearly liberal nominees, such as George McGovern in 1972, were once anomalies, now the electorate regularly chooses between polar opposites. In addition, Layman and Carsey (2002) show that clear conflict between the parties now occurs on multiple fronts, encompassing social welfare, racial, and cultural policies. Because choices in American politics are clearer now than they were in the period Miller and Wattenberg analyzed, we expect the public to give policy considerations greater weight in the Obama elections.

A final reason we expect policy evaluations to have increased since the 1952-80 period is that the information environment in which political campaigns take place has

changed markedly. Consider, for example, that many policy differences are now prominently presented in policy-oriented political commercials, which have increasingly come to dominate modern political campaigns (West 2014). Although the vast increase in campaign spending on political commercials is often criticized as poisoning the political environment with a spate of charges and countercharges, one positive side to more advertising is that the electorate has more opportunities to be exposed to policy arguments. Research over the years has shown that people do indeed learn a significant amount about public policy stands from TV commercials (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Patterson and McClure 1976). Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen (2007) demonstrate that the American public's greater focus on issues can be traced to the high level of policy content in paid political commercials. In addition to advertising, television programming choices are now larger than ever, and some scholars have argued that nontraditional sources of political news, such as soft news (Baum 2005) and late night comedy shows (Parkin 2010), have policy effects on certain segments of the public. Further, beyond television, in recent elections the Internet has made policy information widely available to large swaths of the electorate (Tolbert and McNeal 2003). The 2008 Obama campaign, in particular, was able to mobilize youth voters in great numbers using their digital strategy (Harfoush 2009). Given the changes in accessible campaign information, in volume, medium, and strategy, we expect the electorate to exhibit a greater propensity toward policy arguments made during the 2008 and 2012 elections than in the 1952-80 period.

Sources of Data: Advantages and Disadvantages of Open-Ended Questions

In order to test our hypothesis that more Americans are now evaluating candidates and parties in policy terms, we decided to replicate the Miller and Wattenberg (1985) coding scheme for analyzing the open-ended questions from the ANES. An excellent way to directly ascertain the nature of the messages people send on Election Day is simply to ask a representative sample of citizens what was on their minds as they evaluated the candidates and parties. A set of eight open-ended questions in the ANES have been asked in every presidential election dating back to 1952. This question set asks what people like and dislike about the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees and their parties. Each survey essentially involves short conversations with a random sample of the electorate that year; people are free to say anything they want, unconstrained by the limited number of choices provided by closed-ended questions. A great benefit of the ANES open-ended questions is that they allow respondents to identify what is most important to them about the candidates and the parties, regardless of whether such considerations might occur to the designers of the survey. Furthermore, people can put these considerations into their own words, explaining their own reasoning for why such factors are important to them.

However, this survey technique does have some limitations. For example, some respondents say little or nothing to the open-ended questions, either because they are

unable to express themselves or are reluctant to talk openly. Other respondents simply repeat what they have heard recently from friends or encountered that day in the media. Additionally, the possibility remains that some respondents will provide what they perceive to be socially acceptable answers, rather than what is foremost on their minds. Consider, for instance, that many may have been reluctant to say they were voting against Barack Obama because of his race or because of concerns that he was a Muslim (though we were startled by how many respondents did indeed say things like this).

For the purposes of our analysis here, there is little reason to suspect that such problems with open-ended questions are too different from one cross-section to another. Hence, for assessing whether voters now are thinking in similar or different frameworks from past years, these data are virtually ideal. It is exceedingly difficult to write closed-ended questions that will be relevant across many campaigns; open-ended questions resolve this difficulty by leaving it to the respondents themselves to define what is most relevant.

Reading the verbatim transcripts of what respondents have said to the ANES open-ended yields many insights into what people were thinking when they cast their votes. Unfortunately, all but a few of the scholarly analyses of these data since 1952 have been limited to analyzing the responses coded by the ANES, in which each individual comment is classified into one of several hundred generic categories (e.g., general assessment of economic policy; social security/pensions; foreign policies more clear-cut/decisive). Reading the transcripts as opposed to using coded responses is akin to the advantage a teacher gets from reading a student's short essay as opposed to a few multiple-choice questions. Multiple-choice answers are necessarily limited to a broad brush of generic responses, whereas reading a few sentences can reveal one's reasons for thinking a certain way, as each segment builds on the others to provide insight into one's framework of analysis. Yet, just as with exams from a large lecture class, reading a set of essays is far more time consuming than checking multiple-choice responses.

For our analysis of the 2008 ANES open-ended questions, we read how 2,323 randomly chosen citizens responded to a series of the eight questions about the presidential candidates and the political parties. The mean number of open-ended questions answered was 4.04; therefore, we coded about 9,380 responses to the 2008 ANES survey. In order to make this project more manageable, we opted to read a random half-sample of the 2012 ANES open-ended responses, thereby reducing our sample size for that year to 1,048 respondents. Our analysis of the open-ended data from 2008 revealed that taking a random half-sample would not change any of the basic percentage distributions by more than 2%. Hence, we are confident that our results from 2012 are almost as reliable as those from 2008, and certainly well suited to compare to the Miller–Wattenberg findings (some of which were based on roughly the same number of cases).

Given the extensive time commitment that is required to read so many open-ended responses as recorded verbatim by the interviewers,² it is hardly surprising that very few

2. In the 1952-80 period, responses were written down by hand on paper; in 2008 and 2012, they were typed on a laptop. The biggest problem with the recorded responses on paper was reading the handwriting, whereas with the typed responses poor typing and spelling led to some problems in interpreting what the respondents had said. The lack of interpretability of responses sometimes led a response to be coded as unclear.

investigators have taken on this task. The most notable exception is Philip Converse's famous coding of levels of conceptualization in 1956, which was published in *The American Voter*, and later replicated for some subsequent elections by Pierce and Hagner (1982), Knight (1985), and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008). Another example is Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) article in the *American Political Science Review* entitled "Throwing the Rascals Out: Policy and Performance Evaluations of Presidential Candidates, 1952-1980," which this article replicates for the first time.

Miller and Wattenberg's conceptual framework was designed to help settle the then-current debate over whether President Ronald Reagan had received a policy mandate in the 1980 election. Believing that they had found a useful framework for analyzing how people approach the issues of the campaign, they then asked for and received permission from the ANES to access all of the transcripts from each of the previous presidential election studies. They recruited many undergraduates from their courses at the University of Michigan to read through the microfilmed interviews from the 1952-64 period and the original interviewers' booklets from 1968-80 period. The decision of the ANES to release a spreadsheet of respondents' verbatim comments from the 2008 and 2012 time series surveys enables us to compare citizens' evaluations of the candidates and parties in the Obama elections to what Miller and Wattenberg found years ago.

The Coding Scheme

Fortunately, Miller and Wattenberg (1985) presented a detailed methodological appendix, describing their coding scheme. In addition, the authors provided some examples of responses that they had coded as focusing on either policy or performance. These published details guided our task of faithfully replicating the analysis with the 2008 and 2012 survey data. Miller and Wattenberg (1985, 363) wrote that "most of the comments were relatively easy to code." With the responses from 2008 and 2012, we found the coding process to be similar. The second author of this article conducted all of the initial coding for each year. If she had any doubt about the coding of a response, or if she had coded the response as *mixed* or *unclear*, she put this on a list for the first author to also examine. This cross-check led the first author to review about 10% of responses and to change about 5% of these coding decisions.

The 2008 examples presented below illustrate responses about the candidates that we coded as focusing on *policy* evaluations:

Likes Obama: New ideas and change, especially in improving economy and foreign relations, where we should have been many years ago, and he will move the country forward with his new ideas, he has new ideas for energy, how we do things in this country and the change for Afghanistan and our focus needs to be Afghanistan, saying many things I like. In the past I have voted Republican and he is bringing forth the ideas I think personally that we should be doing. (Respondent 700)

Dislikes Obama: I don't like the idea that we should have a socialized health care. I think somebody else can do a better job than the government. I wish he was not into creating new

programs. I wish he was cutting programs, not making new ones. We are spending too much. I feel like, if we all have to cut back to make ends meet, the government has to do the same. I feel we ALL need to live within our means. (Respondent 1980)

Likes McCain: I like to vote Republican, and I agree with what he stands for, not into politics all that much, as far as Democratic Party because I am for drilling, it makes us more independent. Health care issues—I am against free medical because it does not work; it would not be good because it takes too long to get medical treatment even when you are in dire need. Gas prices are bad—out of 15 gas stations only 2 had gas. Good to protect environment—we do need gas to be able to get to work and pay our bills; drilling wells is good. (Respondent 695)

Dislikes McCain: Under McCain I feel there is less chance of real structural change in government including environmental issues—land, and community and the laws we live under are completely contradictory to natural law particularly land and each other. Communism and socialism are closer to my politics rather than capitalism. (Respondent 349)

As can be seen, these respondents were mostly concerned about what specific decisions the candidates would take once in office. Accordingly, their vote was chiefly designed to bring into office a candidate who agreed with their basic values and would move public policy in the direction which they preferred.

In contrast, other respondents focused more on the ends that the candidates might achieve rather than the means. Such responses were coded as emphasizing performance. Below are some illustrative examples of *performance*-oriented responses:

Likes Obama: The change; since he says he is going to change; his party will do a better job taking us out of the crises. (Respondent 2036)

Dislikes Obama: I'm not exactly sure how well he will get things done he says he wants to do. (Respondent 66)

Likes McCain: I feel the way he is running things he will be a good leader. He knows what he wants to accomplish and take care of. It is going to make a difference. (Respondent 1953)

Dislikes McCain: Republicans have been in office 8 years and made a mess. (Respondent 2271)

In reading through such responses, there is little or no indication of which particular policy direction the respondent had in mind. Instead, such respondents focused primarily on which candidate would do a better job as president or would leave the country better off at home and/or abroad. We do not believe that such considerations are unimportant or irrational. Concerns of who is most likely to be successful in promoting economic growth or peace throughout the world are always central matters in presidential campaigns. Sides and Vavreck (2013, 237) argue that such evaluations were crucial to Obama's reelection, writing that "the Republican Party's loss in 2012 was mainly about performance—specifically, that Obama had 'performed' well enough, as judged by the fundamentals."

Finally, a third basic way of evaluating candidates is to focus on their personal attributes such as competence, integrity, and leadership skills. A vote for a presidential

candidate is ultimately a choice of one person for the nation's highest office. It should therefore be no surprise that many responses focus squarely on the personal qualifications of the candidates. Some examples of comments that were mostly about *candidate attributes* are shown below:

Likes Obama: The way he is with his family. He has that welcome look like that if he was friend of mine I could just sit down and talk to him. And the fact that I never thought I would see the day when an African-American man would get this close to being president. (Respondent 1802)

Dislikes Obama: This guy is a dark horse. Don't know where he is really from. Who paid for his school? We don't know who paid for Harvard. How do you become the head of Harvard board if he only wrote one article? What is his connection with Black Panthers or terrorists? Where was he really born? (Respondent 1299)

Likes McCain: I think that his record is better than the other candidate. We have more to look at and I believe he is more trustworthy. I am a Democrat and I usually for the man and I look at the candidates and I vote for the man not the party. (Respondent 2013)

Dislikes McCain: His age. His not giving direct answers to questions he is asked, which shows an issue of trust for me. (Respondent 2048)

Again, one should not discount such considerations as merely idiosyncratic ways of evaluating presidential candidates. The competence, honesty, and leadership skills of a president are often instrumental in determining whether they are able to carry out policy promises and do a good job for the country (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986).

Following the Miller and Wattenberg coding framework, we also coded all the candidate responses for a time dimension, noting whether the evaluations were retrospective, prospective, or mixed/unclear. There is much debate within the literature as to whether voters focus mostly on the past or on the future (Healy and Malhotra 2013; Holbrook, Clouse, and Weinschenk 2012; Woon 2012). The ability to read what verb tense respondents chose enables us to shed light on this question.

In addition to coding the main focus of responses to the open-ended questions about the presidential candidates, we also coded the 2008 and 2012 open-ended questions about the Democratic Party and the Republican Party according to the same schema. Although Miller and Wattenberg's 1985 article only employed the data from the candidate questions, their coders did code the party questions from 1952 to 1980. This article presents the data that was collected in the 1980s on the likes and dislikes of the political parties for the first time, and we compare these findings to the results we obtained from the Obama elections.

A Policy-Oriented Electorate in 2008 and 2012: Candidate Evaluations

One of the clearest findings to emerge from Miller and Wattenberg's analysis of opinions about the 1952-80 presidential nominees was that the nature of the evaluations

TABLE 1
A Classification of 2012 and 2008 Candidate Evaluations Compared to the 1952-80 Period
(in Percentages)

	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Mixed/Unclear</i>	<i>Performance</i>	<i>Attributes</i>
Obama 2008	40	8	10	42
McCain 2008	38	14	7	41
Candidates in open-seat contests, 1952-68	13	4	30	54
Obama 2012	50	8	21	21
Incumbents running for reelection, 1956-80	20	5	39	36
Romney 2012	50	7	6	36
Challengers to incumbents, 1956-80	32	5	18	45

Sources: Authors' coding of the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 and 2012 surveys, and Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) coding of the 1952-80 ANES surveys.

generally differed according to a candidate's incumbency status. Respondents were most likely to focus on policy matters when evaluating challengers to incumbent presidents, and incumbents running were evaluated primarily on their performance in office. In races without an incumbent, personal attributes dominated the comments about the two contenders, with performance issues clearly being more salient than policy issues (for the specific findings for each individual year, see Miller and Wattenberg 1985).

Based on these patterns, the 2008 nonincumbent election provides a particularly tough test for the hypothesis that voters are more policy oriented now than they were several decades ago. As Miller and Wattenberg wrote about the lack of policy salience in open-seat presidential races, "Comparing two new and untested policy programs may require too much information processing for the average voter" (1985, 365). Such a context certainly describes both the Obama and McCain campaigns of 2008. Furthermore, neither candidate could be said to be in the mold of his party's typical presidential candidate. Obama had served less than four years in a high political office by the time of the 2008 election, and John McCain attempted to distance his campaign from the George W. Bush administration, labeling himself and his running mate Sarah Palin as *mavericks*.

The results in Table 1 show little resemblance between 2008 and the three nonincumbent races analyzed by Miller and Wattenberg. When people had something to say about why they liked or disliked Obama and McCain, roughly 40% of the time they focused on policy matters. Averaging the three open-seat races of 1952, 1960, and 1968 yields just 13% of the responses centering on policy. In short, people's evaluations of the candidates in 2008 were more about the choices that the candidates were offering for the direction of public policy than was the case in the open-seat races of the 1950s and 1960s.

The data from 2012 also point toward a more policy-oriented electorate in the Obama era, relative to the 1952-80 time period. However, the difference from similar past campaigns is not as stark. The presidential races with an incumbent running for reelection, which were analyzed by Miller and Wattenberg (1956, 1964, 1972, and 1980), provided their strongest evidence for the salience of policy evaluations.

In particular, they found that challengers to incumbents were the most likely to be evaluated in policy terms, with unusually ideological candidates (for that time period) like Goldwater and McGovern leading many respondents to make policy comments. Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign could scarcely be considered extreme in its policy stances—at least by twenty-first-century standards (see Abramson et al 2014, 155). Yet, the percentage of comments about Romney that were classified as exclusively or primarily about policy was 50%, as compared to 46% for McGovern and 39% for Goldwater. Even more telling is the finding that 50% of the comments about Obama in 2012 were about policy, whereas in the 1956-80 period the highest comparable figure was 32% with regard to Nixon.

A relative constant throughout the years for which we have data is that about two-fifths of the responses about the candidates center on their personal attributes, such as their political experience or perceived integrity. The 2008 data shown in Table 1 are consistent with this general pattern. Even though policies were quite salient to the 2008 electorate, the personal attributes of the candidates still mattered a great deal. Responses that centered on attributes were roughly equal in proportion to those that centered on policies. In particular, people were especially likely to comment on Obama's intellect, speaking ability, and race, and about McCain's military service, integrity, and age. By 2012, comments about Obama's personal attributes were notably less frequent, whereas Romney's business background and religion generated enough comments to make the focus on attributes almost as much as was the case for previous challengers.

The types of candidate comments that were surprisingly infrequent in the Obama elections were those that were classified as performance based. As articulated above, there are reasons to expect that many respondents would have used performance criteria to evaluate candidates in both 2008 and 2012. Incumbent presidents tend to tout any aspect of their performance that is good, and challengers rush to criticize the results in any way they can. On average, 39% of comments about presidents running for reelection in the 1956-80 period were about performance. In 2012 we find performance comments about Obama were roughly half this level. Further, in the open-seat race of 2008, performance comments about both Obama and McCain were even less (10 and 7%, respectively). In earlier campaigns without an incumbent, many more people looked ahead to the results they expected the candidates to deliver once in office. For example, many people said they liked Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 because he would end the Korean War, John F. Kennedy in 1960 because he would get the American economy moving again, and Richard Nixon in 1968 because he would end the Vietnam War. With the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars continuing throughout 2008 and the American economy crashing during a key part of the fall campaign, the conditions were certainly ripe for respondents to focus on the candidates' likely performance in the future.

Turning to the time dimension, we find the types of issues that the electorate focused on in 2008 were not prospective performance, but rather prospective policy. Table 2 brings the prospective-retrospective dimension into the analysis of what people said about the issues (either performance or policy) when asked about the candidates. It shows that slightly more than three-quarters of the issue-oriented responses in 2008 were classified as being primarily about prospective policy. The contrast with the open-seat

TABLE 2
A Classification of 2012 and 2008 Candidate Issue Evaluations Compared to the 1952-80 Period
(in Percentages)

	<i>Prospective Policy</i>	<i>Retrospective Policy</i>	<i>Prospective Performance</i>	<i>Retrospective Performance</i>
Obama 2008	78	8	9	5
McCain 2008	76	11	5	7
Candidates in open-seat contests, 1952-68	17	12	39	32
Obama 2012	14	57	1	23
Incumbents running for reelection, 1956-80	6	26	7	62
Romney 2012	58	35	5	2
Challengers to incumbents, 1956-80	44	16	22	19

Sources: Authors' coding of the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 and 2012 surveys, and Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) coding of the 1952-1980 ANES surveys.

contests of 1952, 1960, and 1968 could scarcely be greater. In these races, issue responses focused primarily on performance and were only slightly tilted toward the future over the past. Lack of ties to an incumbent administration may have especially facilitated the focus on prospective policy in 2008. Yet, in the similar situation of 1952, only 10% of issue comments about Eisenhower and 13% of issue comments about Adlai Stevenson were classified as being about their policies for the future.

In the 1952-80 period, prospective policy considerations were most prominent in evaluations of challengers to incumbent presidents. Notably, the focus on prospective policy in 2008 greatly exceeds even what was found for such candidates as Goldwater in 1964 (49%) and McGovern in 1972 (61%). In 2012, prospective policy comments made up more than half of the issue comments about Romney. It is also noteworthy that never before had so many of the policy comments about a challenger been retrospective. This pattern points to an electorate now looking at what policy promises a candidate makes as well as the policies he has pursued in the past. For example, consider that comments about health care, a major policy issue in 2012, encompassed Romney's policies as governor as well as his pledge to repeal and replace Obamacare.

A Policy-Oriented Electorate in 2008 and 2012: Party Evaluations

The evidence for a more policy-oriented electorate in the Obama elections relative to previous periods of analysis is further bolstered by our analysis of the open-ended questions about the two major political parties. As abstract entities that are bound together by their desire to influence the course of political change, we should expect that performance and policy issues will make up the vast majority of the comments about the parties. In contrast, because voting for a president is about voting for a person, we should expect the attributes of the candidates to always be fairly paramount. Political parties are less

TABLE 3
A Classification of 2008 and 2012 Political Party Evaluations Compared to the 1952-80 Period (in Percentages)

	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Mixed/Unclear</i>	<i>Performance</i>	<i>Attributes</i>
Democratic Party 2008	66	10	9	16
Republican Party 2008	68	7	10	15
Parties in open-seat contests, 1952-68	37	5	51	7
Democratic Party 2012	72	7	9	13
Parties of incumbents running for reelection, 1956-80	50	9	29	13
Republican Party 2012	74	6	7	13
Parties of challengers to incumbents, 1956-80	52	10	25	13

Sources: Authors' coding of the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 and 2012 surveys, and Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) coding of the 1952-80 ANES surveys.

likely to be evaluated on their general characteristics, although sometimes attributes such as efficient, unified, or strong are mentioned. Ultimately, only about 15% of the comments about parties typically focus on such general attributes compared to about 45% of the responses about candidates. Thus, there has always been a clearer focus on issue evaluations for parties than for candidates.

As with candidates, the nature of the incumbency situation is related to how respondents' issue comments are distributed between performance and policy. Table 3 shows that in open-seat contests, people were more likely to evaluate parties with regard to performance than policy, whereas the reverse was true when an incumbent president was on the ballot. Therefore, as was the case for candidates, party evaluations in the 2008 election present a very tough test for the hypothesis of a policy-oriented electorate in recent years. Here again we find clear evidence that Americans focused more on policy in 2008 than during the 1952-80 period. Roughly two-thirds of evaluations of the Democrats and Republicans in 2008 focused on policy matters as compared to about half of the comments in previous elections with an incumbent and just 37% in open-seat races. Elections with incumbents have always drawn more policy comments regarding the parties, thereby limiting the potential for change. Nevertheless, it is notable that nearly three-quarters of the comments about the parties in 2012 were primarily about policies—a figure unmatched in the 1952-80 period.

Performance-based comments about parties were a relative rarity in the Obama elections compared to the earlier period for which we have data. In *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960, chap. 3) show that many respondents in the 1950s had a clear image of which party had delivered the best results at home as well as abroad. They noted that people frequently viewed the Democrats as the party of prosperity and the Republicans as the party of depression, whereas on foreign affairs the Republicans had the edge as the party of peace, with the Democrats being viewed as the party of war. Such general performance-based images of the parties were rarely found in the 2008 and 2012 data. When people discussed how the parties had handled the economic and foreign challenges facing the nation in the Obama elections, they were far more likely to

discuss the specific policy paths that they had pursued than to offer general performance-based comments.

Because parties are continuing entities that establish a reputation over time, we should expect that people would always evaluate them more retrospectively than prospectively. In the coding conducted by Miller and Wattenberg on the responses about political parties from 1952 to 1980, retrospective evaluations were six times as numerous as prospective evaluations. The only time that a substantial number of party comments were prospective was in 1960, and even then retrospective evaluations represented 70% of the comments. Our initial perusal of the data from 2008 showed no deviation from this general pattern. Hence, we did not code the retrospective–prospective dimension for the party comments in either 2008 or 2012.

A Policy Mandate? Comparing the 2008 and 1980 Evidence

As stated near the outset of this article, the initial motivation for Miller and Wattenberg's coding scheme was to assess whether or not President Reagan had received a policy mandate during the 1980 election. Their conclusion was that the data "fail to support the claim of a mandate for Reagan's policy stands" (Miller and Wattenberg 1985, 359). Arguably, the election of Obama led to more policy change in Washington than any election since that of Reagan in 1980. Thus, an appropriate final test of whether the electorate in the Obama era is actually more policy oriented than in the past is to assess the evidence for a mandate for Obama's policies in 2008 and 2012. Did people who voted for him focus on the policy matters that were aired in the campaigns? Employing the same methodology of analyzing open-ended questions as was done for the 1980 survey data, is the evidence for a policy mandate stronger for the Obama elections than for 1980?

Table 4 compares what voters used as their rationales for their choices in the Obama elections and 1980. We divided such rationales into reasons for voting for a candidate as well as reasons for voting against his opponent. In order to fully assess the mandate question, it is important to examine both, as evidence for policy voting is stronger if it can be shown that voters have not only endorsed one leader's policies, but also rejected alternative policies. Although a third of Reagan voters focused on policy as their reason for being for him, performance assessments clearly dominated when they discussed why they were not for Jimmy Carter. In 2008, we find policy concerns were the major focus of comments for both why Obama voters favored him as well as opposed McCain. Obama also enjoyed a net partisan edge on policy, as more voters employed policy as a reason for voting for him than for McCain. By contrast, it can hardly be said that Reagan earned a mandate given that policy comments were evenly balanced between those in support of him and in support of Carter. In sum, the evidence for a policy mandate is much stronger in the case of the 2008 election than for 1980.

Although we do not have policy/performance coding concerning Reagan's reelection in 1984, the available evidence from the ANES coding scheme shows that Reagan was propelled to a landslide reelection mostly due to the overwhelming positivity of performance-like comments. In comparison, the specific policy comments that were

TABLE 4
 Voters' Rationales: 2012 and 2008 Compared to 1980 (in Percentages)

	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>Performance</i>	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Nothing</i>
Obama 2012 Voters' Rationales					
Like Obama	51	7	11	17	13
Dislike Romney	44	5	3	26	21
Obama 2008 Voters' Rationales					
Like Obama	40	7	13	25	15
Dislike McCain	37	14	4	22	23
Reagan 1980 Voters' Rationales					
Like Reagan	33	6	25	14	22
Dislike Carter	15	6	47	21	11
Romney 2012 Voters' Rationales					
Like Romney	34	10	8	30	19
Dislike Obama	41	6	25	21	7
McCain 2008 Voters' Rationales					
Like McCain	25	14	8	39	13
Dislike Obama	33	6	3	43	15
Carter 1980 Voters' Rationales					
Like Carter	15	5	23	43	14
Dislike Reagan	36	1	11	33	20

Sources: Authors' coding of the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 and 2012 surveys, and Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) coding of the 1980 ANES survey.

made about Reagan were notably more negative than positive (see Wattenberg 1991, chaps. 5 and 6). Our coding of the 2012 open-ended responses tells a much different story regarding Obama's narrow reelection win. Policy comments were more of a net asset than a liability for him, whereas performance comments were more unfavorable than favorable. Hence, Obama could well claim more of a policy mandate for his slim 2012 reelection victory than Reagan could for his landslide 1984 reelection.

Who Are the Policy-Oriented Voters?

To better understand the nature of the electorate's focus on policy considerations in 2008 and 2012, we created a variable measuring the percentage of open-ended responses that were coded as primarily concerning policy. This variable ranges in value from 0 to 100 and is necessarily limited to the respondents who said something codeable to at least one of the eight questions about the presidential candidates and the political parties. Table 5 displays a set of multiple regression equations, which explain some of the variation in how much people focused their 2008 and 2012 comments on policy as opposed to performance or attributes.

We hypothesized that one of the major reasons for the electorate's focus on policy in the Obama elections was the sorting of Democratic and Republican officeholders into relatively coherent ideological blocks. To test this hypothesis, we combined two highly related variables into an index of knowledge about party positions to capture this effect. The index

TABLE 5
Regression Equations Predicting the Percentage of Candidate and Party Responses Classified as Policy Oriented

	2008 MI			2008 M2			2012MI			2012 M2		
	B	Se		B	Se		B	Se		B	Se	
Index of seeing dif- ference between the parties and knowing which party is more conservative (coded 0-2)	5.73***	1.08		4.54***	1.10		8.37***	1.55		7.41***	1.63	
Interest in the Campaign	1.38	1.09		.13	1.12		4.46**	1.51		3.86*	1.54	
(1 = Not much; 2 = somewhat; 3 = very much)												
Strong partisan Interviewed after First Presidential Debate	4.63**	1.54		5.10**	1.54		-2.27	2.24		-1.89	2.25	
	3.64**	1.40		3.75**	1.39		-.82	2.09		-1.06	2.09	
Years of Education	.15	.31		-.20	.32		1.35**	.43		1.13*	.45	
Age	-.30***	.04		-.30***	.04		-.23***	.06		-.23***	.06	
Female	-1.69	1.38		-1.25	1.38		-3.20	2.01		-2.71	2.03	
Black	-2.13	2.20		-1.24	2.20		5.93*	3.01		5.95*	3.01	
Hispanic	-3.23	2.71		-2.70	2.70		10.64**	3.55		11.21**	3.56	
Total # of questions with response	—	—		1.90***	.42		—	—		1.29	.66	
Constant	53.67***	5.37		51.64***	5.36		46.95***	8.12		44.80***	8.18	
Multiple R	.25			.27			.32			.32		
N of cases	1895			1895			899			899		

Source: Authors' coding of the American National Election Studies 2008 and 2012 surveys. Notes: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

includes whether respondents saw major differences between the parties and whether they knew which party is more conservative. This knowledge index did prove to be a highly significant predictor of an increased focus on policy concerns in both 2008 and 2012.

In addition, we included in the model a variety of measures and correlates with political involvement. These were (1) interest in the campaign; (2) being a strong partisan; (3) being interviewed after the first debate, and hence more likely to be exposed to policy arguments; and (4) years of education, which presumably gives people a better capacity to absorb policy arguments. We found relationships between each of these measures in one or the other year. In 2008, being a strong partisan and being interviewed after the first debate were significant predictors of an increased focus on policies. As we suspected, this finding suggests that understanding the choices presented, as well as exposure to information, are important factors for evaluating candidates in policy terms. In 2012, with reduced excitement about the campaign compared to the historic campaign four years earlier, we find significant effects from interest in the campaign and years of education. These effects, though found in different measures, are consistent with the findings from 2008. People interested in the campaign are more likely to be exposed to information about policy, and the education finding indicates that the capacity to evaluate policy arguments is likely a prior condition to policy evaluations.

Due to generational replacement, we also expected to find a significant relationship between age and a focus on policy concerns, as younger people have been politically socialized in an age of more polarized parties. Indeed, the results of the multivariate analysis in both 2008 and 2012 strongly confirm this hypothesis. The age coefficient translates into a difference in policy focus between an 80-year-old and a 20-year-old of 18% in 2008 and 14% in 2012, with younger respondents being more policy oriented. This wide age gap indicates that we may well be seeing a generational sea-change in how voters evaluate candidates and parties. People who first voted in the so-called issueless 1950s are being replaced in the electorate by their grandchildren, who have received their political socialization in a much more polarized environment, replete with hotly debated policy issues.

Finally, we provide an alternate model specification for each year that accounts for the variation in the number of questions each respondent answered. We find the number of questions answered, which ranges from 0 to 8, is associated with a positive, statistically significant effect on the likelihood of being policy oriented in 2008. For 2012 we find no significant effect, and in both years the addition of this variable to the previously specified model does not change the substance of our findings.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article has documented the way Americans evaluated parties and candidates in the past two presidential elections. Compared to the period from 1952 to 1980, such evaluations were clearly more policy oriented in the elections won by Obama. During the 2008 campaign, the economy faced a greater crisis than had been seen in any presidential election since the Great Depression of 1932. Yet, in the midst of this crisis, voters discussed more about the policy direction the candidates and parties would take than the

basic question of who would do the best job of handling the situation. Four years later in 2012, the candidates disagreed sharply as to whether Obama had performed adequately in meeting the economic crisis. Nevertheless, voters' rationales for liking or disliking the candidates and parties centered much more on policy questions than the simple matter of performance

To call the Obama-era electorate policy oriented, however, does not necessarily require today's electorate to be politically sophisticated. Over and over again, as we read through the interview protocols, we were struck by how people's responses often reflected a paucity of political knowledge. Many people mentioned one or more policy matters but with a bare minimum of words and details. Others said more, but often their extended comments made it even clearer that they did not know that much about public policy. Having carefully read the open-ended responses of 3,384 randomly chosen individuals for this article, it is hard to argue with the conclusion of Lewis Beck et al. (2008, 425) in *The American Voter Revisited* that most voters "are 'cognitive misers' learning only as much as they have to in order to decide how to vote."

Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) replicated the famous levels of conceptualization scheme from *The American Voter* and found that ideological thinking was not much more evident in the open-ended responses from the 2000 ANES study than in the 1950s. Although ideological conceptualization addresses an important question in political science, namely, whether voters are employing the liberal/conservative framework that political elites rely on, it is not intended to measure whether or not people are trying to guide the direction of future public policies. The Miller–Wattenberg framework is specifically designed to hone in on whether respondents are using policy, performance, or attributes as their main criterion for liking or disliking each candidate and party. Because we ask a more precise research question, which demands less from individual respondents, we find more change over time than Lewis-Beck et al. did in *The American Voter Revisited*. One need not be an ideologue or a near-ideologue in order to take policy into account in one's voting decision.

In *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960, 541) noted that "[t]he public's explicit task is to decide not what government shall do but rather *who shall decide* what government shall do." Our data demonstrate that compared to the era analyzed in *The American Voter* more Americans in the Obama era tried to guide what the government should do when they cast their votes. Campbell et al. (1960, 545) concluded that, "However great the potential ability of the public to enforce a set of concrete policy demands at the polls, it is clear that this power is seldom used in American politics." If the 2008 and 2012 survey data are typical of elections in the twenty-first century, such a conclusion is now inoperative. We expect future elections to shed further light on this question. In 2008, 82% of those who voted for Obama answered at least one of the candidate or party questions in a way that focused on policy to justify their vote, and the same percentage was found for McCain voters; in 2012, 86% of Obama voters offered a policy comment that explained their vote, and 79% of Romney voters did so.³ As we should

3. Voters were asked four questions in which they could justify their vote (e.g., for Obama voters (1) likes Obama, (2) dislikes McCain, (3) likes Democratic Party, (4) dislikes Republican Party). The average number of responses that were classified as policy ranged from 1.7 for McCain voters in 2008 to 2.1 for Obama voters in 2012.

expect, among each candidate's supporters, there was a wide degree of variance as to what particular policy messages were being sent. Yet, not all voters have to focus on the exact same elements of a candidate's platform in order to have "enforced policy demands at the polls," to use *The American Voter's* phrase.

Nor does it necessarily require a good deal of education or political interest to be classified as policy voter in the framework we have employed here. We found that reliance on policy assessments was significantly higher among the better educated and more politically interested respondents in just one of the two Obama elections. These patterns were far too weak to account for the substantial movement toward a more policy-oriented electorate that we found. A much better explanation for why the electorate is now more focused on policy evaluations is V. O. Key's classic echo chamber analogy. As Key (1966, 2) wrote, "The voice of the people is but an echo chamber. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them." In the elections analyzed by Campbell et al. (1960, 1966), the candidates were deliberately vague as to how they would accomplish the goals they set out. For example, Eisenhower famously said in 1952 that he would go to Korea, but he never articulated what policies he would implement to bring the war to a conclusion. Without any concrete policy alternatives being discussed, the focus of people's evaluations was naturally more on the ends rather than the means. In contrast, in 2008 Obama offered a clear policy contrast to the policies of McCain regarding how to end the war in Iraq. In both 2008 and 2012, the contenders clearly differed on policies like health care coverage, abortion, income tax rates, and a host of other stands. As for the parties, whereas roughly 50% of the electorate consistently thought there were important differences in what they stood for throughout the 1952-80 period, in the elections of 2008 and 2012, this percentage had risen to nearly 80%. In short, a clearer policy message from the candidates and the parties has resulted in an electorate that is more focused on policies in its decision making relative to previous eras.

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