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## THE ORIGINS OF POLICY ISSUE SALIENCE

### Personal and National Importance Impact on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Issue Engagement<sup>1</sup>

*Joanne M. Miller, Jon A. Krosnick, and  
Leandre R. Fabrigar*

Most scholars of American mass political behavior feel comfortable using and reading the term “issue salience.” It has been used for decades to illustrate that any given policy issue (abortion, gun control, etc.) may be a focus of thinking for some citizens while being ignored by others at the same time. Heinz Eulau (1955) used the term for the first time in the *American Political Science Review*, and it has appeared in 1273 articles in the *APSR*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Behavior*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its frequent use in the literature, policy issue salience has more often been a vague metaphor than a precisely defined scientific concept with an accepted operationalization. The majority (62%) of articles that focused on policy issue salience provided no conceptual definition of the term at all. Among the remaining articles, salience was defined in a variety of different ways. Some assumed that salient policy issues are those that are prominent in the minds of citizens, frequently the subject of thought (Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995; Feldman and Sigelman, 1985; Fleishman, 1986; Lau, Brown, & Sears, 1978; RePass, 1971; Schuman, Ludwig, & Krosnick, 1986). Others said that policy issue salience is the amount of importance that an individual citizen attaches to an issue (Adams, 1997; Chaney, Alvarez, & Nagler, 1998; Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Hutchings, 2001; Kaufman & Petrocik, 1999; Kerr, 1978; Lau, Brown, & Sears, 1978; Monroe, 1998; Mutz & Soss, 1997; Niemi & Bartels, 1985; Rabinowitz,

Prothro, & Jacoby, 1982; Stewart, Warhola, & Blough, 1984; Wright, 1976). And still others provided different definitions.

Likewise, scholars have measured issue salience in many different ways. Some scholars presumed that the more often political elites or the news media mention an issue, the more salient it is to everyone in a population (elites: Stewart, Warhola, & Blough, 1984; media: Canes-Wrone & de Marchi, 2002; Edwards et al., 1995; Hardin, 1998). One author assumed that the higher the price of electricity, the more salient electricity-related issues were to people (Berry, 1979). Some authors presumed that the amount of weight voters place on an issue in evaluating political candidates indicates the salience of the issue (Adams, 1997; Bernstein, 1995; Chaney, Alvarez, & Nagler, 1998; Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999). Some authors presumed that salience is indicated by membership in a social group or groups for which the issue is directly relevant (Conover, 1984; Hutchings, 2001). Still others viewed issue salience as indicated by the amount of time citizens said they spent thinking about the issue (Beck & Parker, 1985). And other articles presumed that the more respondents in a survey sample say they “don’t know” their opinion on an issue, the less salient it is to everyone in a population (Petry, 1999; Pierce, 1975; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986).

The most popular measurement approach has been to gauge the amount of importance citizens ascribe to the issue, but through two principal and different ways. The most common has been to ask people to report the importance of a policy issue for the country (Best, 1999; Campbell, 1983; Erbring et al., 1980; Flanagan, 1980; Green & Guth, 1988; Lau et al., 1978; Monroe, 1998; RePass, 1971; Schuman et al., 1986) or for their community (Mutz & Soss, 1997). Less common has been to ask people to report how important the issue is to them personally, without mention of the country (Niemi & Bartels, 1985; Rabinowitz et al., 1982; Tedin, 1979; Wright, 1976). Some authors have combined measures of national and personal importance into an aggregated measure of salience (e.g., Lau et al., 1978), and others have measured issue importance without telling respondents whether to gauge the importance to them personally, to the country, or to some other aggregation (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985).

If research conclusions about the origins and consequences of salience were the same regardless of how the construct is measured, then these operational distinctions would have little practical importance. But in fact, a large literature suggests that the choice between measuring personal importance vs. national important may have substantial impact on research findings. Citizens’ judgments of the national economy have much more impact on presidential evaluations and voting than do those citizens’ personal economic circumstances (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979, 1981; Lau & Sears, 1981), and people’s policy preferences and participation in social protests is driven minimally by their own self-interest and instead is driven more by perceptions of the best interest of people around

them (see Birt & Dion, 1987; Bobo, 1988; Sears & Funk, 1990, 162). Thus, self-interest seems to have little effect on the valence of political attitudes.

But is the same true of issue salience? Do citizens think about and act mostly on the policy issues they think are important for the nation as a whole? Or do citizens focus their thinking and actions on issues that are important to them personally? To answer these questions, we begin by offering a formal definition of issue salience and reviewing the existing findings of research that measured salience via personal and national importance. Finally, we describe the results of nine studies gauging the impact of personal and national issue importance judgments on citizens' cognitive and behavioral engagement in a policy issue domain. This evidence makes the case that salience operationalization should not be done arbitrarily, because different measures produce very different results in a way that casts light on the core nature of salience and on popular political judgment.

### Defining Policy Issue Salience

The work that we describe here is premised on the notion that the more salient a particular policy issue is to a citizen, the more he or she is cognitively and behaviorally engaged in that issue. That is, if an issue is salient to a person, he or she thinks frequently and deeply about it, gathers information about it to accumulate in long-term memory, and uses the issue as a basis for making voting decisions and charting other courses of political action. This definition is faithful to the spirit of most past work on policy issue salience and also resonates with work in psychology on attitude strength (see, e.g., Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

### Past Studies of National Issue Importance Judgments

A great deal of research has explored the dynamics of judgments of the national importance of policy issues in the U.S. Not surprisingly, judgments of the national importance of an issue rise and fall according to changes in the objective seriousness of national problems (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Erbring et al., 1980; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; MacKuen, 1984b; MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Schuman et al., 1986; Wlezien, 2005). In addition, national importance judgments rise and fall with the volume of media attention to that issue, an effect dubbed "agenda-setting" (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Erbring et al., 1980; MacKuen 1984a, 1984b; MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Miller & Wanta, 1996).

Cohen (1963) characterized the latter effect this way:

The press ... is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think *about* ... The editor may believe he is only printing the things that people want to read, but he is thereby putting a claim on their attention, powerfully determining what they will be thinking about, and talking about.

(p. 13)

Thus, he presumed that if citizens say an issue is nationally important, then they are presumably thinking and talking about it. Consistent with this logic, McCombs and Reynolds (2002) said that agenda-setting is “establishing [issue] salience among the public so that an issue becomes the focus of public attention, thought, and perhaps even action” (p. 1). Other agenda-setting work has presumed that by causing people to view an issue as nationally important, news media attention to it leads people to place more weight on the issue when evaluating candidates (Iyengar, 1979) and when deciding for whom to vote (Weaver, 1987, 1994).

However, very few studies have actually tested the presumption that national importance judgments are cognitively and behaviorally consequential, and the evidence from these studies is quite mixed. Ostrom and Simon (1985) found that evaluations of the state of the economy and of foreign policy decision-making affected presidential approval to the extent that the issues were said to be nationally important by the public (see also Miller & Krosnick, 2000). And Flanagan (1980) found that voter occupation (a proxy for economic self-interest) had more impact on vote choice among citizens who considered economic issues to be more important for the nation. But contrary to the sociotropic perspective, Maggiotto and Piereson (1978) and Johns (2008) found that candidate preferences were *not* shaped more powerfully by issues that voters believed were more important for the nation. Natchez and Bupp (1968) found that issues people cited as more important for the nation had *less* impact on voting. And Wlezien (2005) found that attaching more national importance to defense spending was not associated with more impact of general defense spending preferences on support for specific changes in defense spending policy.

Macro-level work on government responsiveness has also assumed that peoples’ national importance judgments are politically consequential (e.g., Hibbs, 1979; Monroe, 1998), and some studies have offered empirical support for the presumption. For example, Jones (1994) found that policy attitudes predicted government policies better when more citizens said the issue was nationally important. From this evidence, he concluded that, “where policies are salient, it is likely that [government] responsiveness is more forthcoming” (p. 128).

Macro-level national importance judgments have also been shown to affect candidates’ campaign strategies. For example, Burden and Sandberg (2003) found that when more Americans cited the federal budget as one of the nation’s most important issues, candidates were more likely to address the budget during subsequent campaign speeches. Therefore, Burden and Sandberg concluded that issue salience causes attention to an issue by candidates. Campbell (1983) found that although national importance judgments had no direct effect on the specificity with which candidates describe their issue positions to the public, more national importance attached to an issue by the public “causes candidates to move closer to the median position of the public. This greater proximity, in

turn, reduces the candidates' fear of voter disaffection, thus allowing them to clarify their positions" (p. 290).

### **Past Studies of Personal Issue Importance Judgments**

Another research tradition, with its roots in psychology, suggests the possibility that cognitive and behavioral engagement in a policy issue may be motivated differently, by personal importance rather than national importance judgments (see, e.g., Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). To attach personal importance to an issue is to care tremendously about the issue and to be deeply concerned about it. Such personal concern has been posited to come from one of three sources: (1) material self-interest (because a policy issue is thought to have direct implications for a person's behavioral rights and privileges); (2) identification with reference groups or reference individuals (when they are affected directly by the issue or attach great personal importance to it); and (3) values (when they are seen as linked to the issue; Boninger et al., 1995). People presumably know very well when they are deeply concerned about an issue, and they know just as well when they have no special concern about one. Deep concern about an issue is presumably not fleeting—it is thought to be much like taking a new job or getting married, entailing a long-term connection and commitment. And this personal concern, emanating from very personal considerations closely linked to self-concepts, may be what makes a policy issue psychologically salient to a citizen (i.e., cognitively and behaviorally consequential).

If this is true, then citizens do not shift their personal issue priorities easily or often. Once a person gets attached to a policy issue, that attachment is likely to last over time and to be self-reinforcing—thinking about an issue breeds more thinking; knowledge gain breeds more knowledge gain; and attitude-expressive action breeds more action. So even as the objective conditions of the country change and people see changes in the most important problem facing the country, their personal connections to issues may remain relatively fixed.

A number of studies have provided evidence consistent with these presumptions about personal importance. People for whom a policy issue is highly personally important have been shown to place great weight on it when deciding how to vote (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977; Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, & Neviite, 2003; Granberg & Holmberg, 1986; Krosnick, 1988a; Rabinowitz et al., 1982; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Shapiro, 1969; Visser, Krosnick, & Simons, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Citizens for whom an issue is highly personally important are the most likely to write letters to the media and to public officials expressing their views on the issue (Krosnick, 1986; Schuman & Presser, 1981). Financial contributions to and memberships in interest groups come mostly from people for whom the issue is highly personally important (Krosnick, 1986; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Visser et al.,

2003). And people for whom an issue is personally important selectively expose themselves to information on the issue, attend closely to that information, think carefully about its implications, have more accessible attitudes toward the issue, remember it accurately long after exposure, see extensive linkages between the issue and others, and hold stable opinions on the issue (see, e.g., Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005; Bizer & Krosnick 2001; Howard-Pitney, Borgida, & Omoto, 1986; Jackman, 1977; Krosnick, 1988b, 1991; Lavine, Sullivan, Borgida, & Thomsen, 1996; Visser et al., 2003).

One possible reason for the power of personal importance judgments involves the cognitive demands of political information processing. A great deal of psychological research suggests that people are cognitive misers who seek to minimize information processing whenever possible (e.g., see Fiske & Taylor, 1990). Understanding the importance of issues for the nation as a whole may require large-scale understanding of the country. In contrast, a person can decide to attach personal importance to an issue despite having very little information about that issue, based on idiosyncratic considerations. As a result, people may form judgments of personal importance with great confidence, whereas judgments about the importance of issues for the nation may be formed more tentatively. Therefore, these latter judgments may be less consequential in guiding thinking and action.

If all these speculations are true, they have a number of important implications. For example, the dynamics of national importance judgments caused by media agenda-setting and real-world cues may have no substantial, real, lasting effects on the political behavior of the citizenry of a nation. Ups and downs in the public's agenda documented by public opinion polls surely have some effects on the conduct of elite politics, because answers to the "most important problem" question are widely reported in the news media and call legislators' attention to some problems while deflecting their attention from others (Cohen, 1973; Kingdon, 1981, 1995; Peters & Hogwood, 1985; Wlezien, 2005). But this may be the only political consequence of agenda-setting and real-world cue effects on national importance judgments.

### **This Investigation**

Before we jump to this conclusion, however, it is important to recognize that it is too early to reject the notion that national importance judgments indicate individual-level policy issue salience. We have found very few studies exploring this question, and they are quite limited in scope. Indeed, these studies are so idiosyncratic that they seem to provide no basis at all for drawing broad conclusions in this regard. More research seems to be needed before we should conclude that national importance judgments are inconsequential in the minds of citizens.

The studies described below attempted to explore these issues by investigating six questions. The *first question* is: Are personal importance and national importance judgments empirically distinct from one another? These two types of judgments are obviously conceptually distinct, and citizens have been shown to distinguish between individual and collective political judgments in other domains (e.g., Conover, 1984). However, cognitive consistency theories argue that people are motivated to maintain consistency among cognitions (e.g. Festinger, 1957). This motivation could lead people to perceive issues that are important to them personally as also important for the country and vice versa. If this is so, there would be no point in any further comparisons of these two judgments. We found that these two types of judgments are distinct from one another, which suggests merit in comparing the political effects of personal and national importance.

The *second question* is: Which is more consequential in shaping issue-relevant political behavior—personal importance or national importance? We gauged whether attaching personal or national importance to an issue inspired citizens to express their policy preferences to public officials or the news media, to contribute money to a political lobbying organization attempting to influence policy on the issue, and to attend meetings or do other work with grassroots organizations trying to influence policy on the issue. Such actions turned out to be driven more by personal importance than by national importance.

Our *third question* is: Which is more consequential in shaping candidate preferences—personal importance or national importance? If a policy issue is genuinely salient for a member of a democratic polity, and if that salience has real and meaningful cognitive consequences, he or she should use the issue to choose candidates. We gauged the extent to which personal importance and national importance judgments moderated the impact of policy preferences on candidate preferences and vote choices, and found personal importance to have strong impact in this regard, whereas national importance did not.

The *fourth question*, inspired by Converse's (1964) instincts about issue public membership, asks: Is personal importance more consequential than national importance because the former is more effective at inspiring cognitive and emotional engagement in an issue? Specifically, attaching importance to a policy issue may motivate people to seek exposure to information on the issue and store lots of such information in their long-term memories, to think extensively about that information, to develop a sense of certainty about their opinions on the issue, and for those opinions to become very accessible in memory and therefore easy to retrieve and use (see, e.g., Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995). In addition, attaching importance to an issue may activate and engage a person's emotion systems (e.g., Lazarus & Smith, 1988; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993), thus directing and inspiring action (see Zajonc, 1998 for a review). We therefore explored whether personal importance and national importance inspire knowledge accumulation, thought, certainty, attitude accessibility, and emotional



reactions to issue-relevant information. Personal importance turned out to be the primary instigator, and national importance had almost no effects at all.

*Fifth*, we formally tested the mediational question implicit in the logic offered above: Does cognitive and emotional issue engagement mediate the effect of personal importance on political behavior? That is, we explored whether personal importance leads to increases in attitude-expressive behavior by first increasing cognitive and emotional issue engagement. We found evidence of such mediation.

Finally, we ask a *sixth question*: Is national importance more consequential than it appeared to be in the analyses outlined above because it is a cause of personal importance? Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995) speculated that if a policy issue is important to a social group with which a person identifies, that issue will become personally important to the person as a result. Although Boninger et al. (1995) reported evidence consistent with this claim, none of their studies examined identification with the nation as a whole, instead focusing on other, smaller, social groups. It is therefore possible that national importance judgments shape personal importance judgments. The reverse is also possible: if attaching personal importance to an issue leads people to gather information about it and to think carefully about the implications of that information, a consequence of that process may be recognition of many reasons why the issue is truly important for the nation as a whole. We therefore gauged the causal impact of personal importance judgments on national importance judgments and vice versa.

## Description of Studies

To explore these questions, we analyzed nine sets of data, described briefly below (and in more detail in the Appendix).

### *Study 1 and 2*

Studies 1 and 2 assessed the relation between personal and national issue importance judgments. For Study 1, telephone interviews were conducted by trained telephone interviewers with 400 18–24 year-old students from a large Midwest university. For Study 2, data were collected via self-administered questionnaires with 471 18–24 year-old students from a large Midwest university who participated for course credit. Respondents reported how important each of a series of policy issues were to them personally and how important each issue was for the U.S. as a whole.

### *Study 3*

Study 3 examined the impact of personal and national importance judgments on candidate preferences and vote choice using the 1980, 1984, and 1996 American National Election Study (NES) surveys. The 1980 NES involved interviewing



three separate, nationally representative samples, and we combined all of the data from interviews done just before and after the election with 3,136 American adults. For the 1984 NES, 1,989 Americans were interviewed in September/October and again in November/December. For the 1996 NES, 1,534 Americans were interviewed in September/October and again in November/December. In each of these surveys, respondents reported their attitudes on a series of policy issues, their perceptions of the presidential candidates' stands on the issues, the personal and national importance of the issues, their attitudes toward the presidential candidates, and their vote choices.

#### ***Study 4***

Study 4 used a different method to test whether more important policy attitudes have more impact on candidate preferences and to gauge the impact of personal and national importance on direct expression of policy preferences to public officials and the news media. A national sample of 512 American adults was contacted via random-digit dialing and interviewed by telephone by International Communications Research, Inc., in December, 1988. Respondents were asked about the personal and national importance of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the impact of that issue on their candidate preferences, and whether they had expressed their views on the issue to a public official or the media.

#### ***Study 5***

Studies 3 and 4 involved only single measures of personal and national importance judgments, so the statistical parameters estimated with those data were attenuated by measurement error in responses to those questions. Study 5 measured personal and national importance judgments with multiple items, permitting correction of parameter estimates for random and systematic measurement error. A representative sample of 148 adult residents of a large Midwest city, was contacted via random digit dialing and interviewed by telephone by staff at a major Midwest university. Respondents reported the personal and national importance of four issues (abortion, gun control, health care, and trade with Mexico) and described the impact of each issue on their presidential candidate preferences and whether they had expressed their attitudes on any of the issues to elected officials or the news media.

#### ***Study 6***

Study 6 focused on the issue of global warming and assessed the impact of personal and national importance on an index of policy-relevant political behaviors. In addition, Study 6 gauged the impact of personal and national

importance on an index of cognitive issue engagement. This study also explored whether cognitive issue engagement mediated the effect of personal importance on behavioral issue engagement.

Computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 1413 American adults (generated by RDD) by the survey research center at a major Midwest university between September 1997 and February 1998. Respondents reported the personal and national importance of the issue of global warming. They also reported on whether they had expressed their opinions about the issue to politicians or the news media, whether they had made a financial contribution to a political organization concerned with global warming, and whether they had attended a group meeting to discuss the issue (these measures were averaged to form an overall index of issue-relevant political behavior). Finally, respondents reported how much they felt they knew about global warming, how much they had thought about the issue, and how certain they were of their opinions about the issue (these three measures were averaged to form an overall index of cognitive issue engagement).

### ***Study 7***

Study 7 explored whether personal and national importance affected a new indicator of cognitive issue engagement (attitude accessibility), a second operationalization of knowledge accumulation (memory for issue information), and affective issue engagement (emotional reactions to issue-relevant information).

Three-hundred-and-eighty-five 18–25 year-old students from a large Midwest university participated in this experiment for course credit. The experiment employed a procedure developed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987). Respondents watched a 20-minute videotape containing seven stories taken from ABC, CBS, and NBC national evening news broadcasts. Five of the stories were fillers that all respondents watched. One-third of the respondents (selected randomly) saw two additional stories about crime. Another one-third of the respondents instead saw two additional stories about unemployment. And the final one-third saw two additional stories about pollution instead.

After viewing the videotape, respondents answered questions on a computer (which measured attitude accessibility via reaction time to attitude report questions) and on a paper-and-pencil questionnaire (measuring the personal and national importance of crime, unemployment, and pollution, memory for the news stories they had watched, and the emotional reactions they had to the news stories).

### ***Study 8***

Of the 1413 respondents interviewed for Study 6, 497 were reinterviewed between December 1997 and February 1998. Study 8 was of the 446 panel

respondents (who were interviewed in both December 1997 and February 1988) with valid data on all the variables needed to estimate the effects of personal and national importance on one another. These respondents reported the personal and national importance of the issue of global warming during both interviews.

### **Study 9**

Study 9 used data from Wave 22 of the 2008–2009 ANES panel study (focusing on the issues of the war in Iraq and global warming) to explore the impact of personal and national importance on issue-relevant behavior, cognitive issue engagement, and emotional issue engagement, as well as whether cognitive or emotional engagement mediated the effect of personal importance on political behavior.

A representative sample of 2270 U.S. citizens aged 18 or older completed the survey via online computers between October 22 and November 30, 2009. Respondents reported the personal and national importance of the issues of global warming and the Iraq war. They also reported whether they had expressed their attitude on each issue to a government official or a news organization, contributed money to an organization working on each of the issues, worked with an organization focused on each of the issues, or attended a group meeting to talk about each of the issues (combined to form separate indices of behavior regarding global warming and Iraq war). In addition, respondents reported how much they felt they knew about global warming and the Iraq war (in separate question), how much they had thought about each issue, and how certain they were of their opinions about each issue (these three measures were averaged to form an overall index of cognitive issue engagement). Finally, respondents were asked to report how angry, hopeful, afraid, and proud they felt when they thought about what people have been doing and saying in recent years about the issues of global warming and the Iraq war (the four emotions were averaged to form indices of emotional arousal for the two issues).

## **Results**

### ***Question 1: Are Personal and National Importance Judgments Empirically Distinct?***

To explore whether people's judgments of the extent to which an issue is important to them personally differ from the extent to which they perceive the issue to be important for the nation, we estimated the parameters of multiple indicator covariance structure models and corrected for random and systematic measurement error using data from Studies 1 and 2.<sup>4</sup> Both studies' models fit the data well (Study 1:  $\chi^2(74) = 129.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .046; standardized

RMR = .029; non-normed fit index = .95; Study 2:  $\chi^2(184) = 347.41, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .044; standardized RMR = .023; non-normed fit index = .95).<sup>5</sup>

Corrected correlations between personal importance and national importance ranged from .49 to .73 and averaged .61 (see Table 6.1). This means that only 37% of the variance was shared between personal and national importance on average. Not surprisingly, constraining the correlations between personal and national importance for each issue to be 1.0 significantly worsened the fit of covariance structure models (Study 1:  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 235.11, p < .001$ ; Study 2:  $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 457.67, p < .001$ ). Thus, respondents' personal and national importance judgments appeared to be distinct.

Using the data from representative national samples from Studies 4 and 6, we found that correlations between personal and national importance regarding the Arab–Israel conflict and global warming were .30 ( $p < .001$ ), and .42 ( $p < .001$ ), respectively. When we disattenuated these correlations for measurement error using the average reliability of the importance measures generated with data from Studies 1 and 2, we found them to be .48 and .67, respectively, which average .58, reinforcing the findings from Studies 1 and 2.

This evidence clearly challenges the assumption that personal and national importance judgments are isomorphic. But from this evidence alone, we cannot tell which of these constructs is worth spotlighting in theories of political cognition and action. Perhaps one construct is consequential, whereas the other is not. But perhaps both are consequential and deserve theoretical attention.

**TABLE 6.1** Corrected Correlations Between Personal Importance and National Importance—Studies 1 and 2

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Study 1</i>	<i>Study 2</i>
Capital Punishment	.56	
Central America	.63	
Abortion	.73	
Defense Spending	.55	.51
Environment		.66
Unemployment		.60
Drug Abuse		.63
Taxes		.49
School Bussing		.72

Note: All correlations are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

**Question 2: Which is More Consequential in Shaping Issue Specific Political Behavior—Personal or National Importance?**

Using data from Studies 4 and 5, we examined the impact of personal and national importance on the decision to express one’s policy preferences to politicians or the news media. For Study 4, logistic regression coefficients were estimated, predicting attitude expression on the issue of the Arab–Israeli conflict with the variables listed in Table 6.2. As column 1 shows, personal importance

**TABLE 6.2** Personal and National Importance Predicting Issue Impact on Policy Preference Expression, Financial Contributions, Working with an Organization, and Attending a Group Meeting—Studies 4, 5, 6, and 9

	<i>Policy Preference Expression</i>	<i>Policy Preference Expression</i>	<i>Environment Behavior Index</i>	<i>Iraq Behavior Index</i>	<i>Global Warming Behavior Index</i>
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>(Study 4)</i>	<i>(Study 5)</i>	<i>(Study 6)</i>	<i>(Study 9)</i>	<i>(Study 9)</i>
Personal Importance	1.70* (.76)	.38*** (.12)	.11** (.02)	.15*** (.02)	.19*** (.02)
National Importance	1.04 (.83)	.06 (.14)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.02)	-.05+ (.02)
Male	.49 (.47)	-.05 (.03)	.01 (.01)	.02* (.01)	.03*** (.02)
Age	-1.14 (.74)	.00 (.07)	-.02 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
White	.12 (.70)		.02+ (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (0.1)
Income	-1.14 (.83)		-.03* (.01)	-.04*** (.01)	-.14** (.01)
Education	2.79*** (.82)	.10 (.06)	.04** (.01)	.06*** (.02)	.11*** (.02)
Democrat			-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Republican			-.03** (.01)	-.02 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.08	.06	.06	.08
N	386	111	1270	1931	1911

Note: Table entries in columns 1 are logistic regression coefficients. Table entries in column 2 are unstandardized coefficients obtained from LISREL. Table entries in columns 3-5 are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

+p < .10    \*p < .05    \*\* p < .01    \*\*\* p < .001

was a significant instigator of policy preference expression ( $b = 1.70, p < .05$ ), but national importance was not ( $b = 1.04, n.s.$ ). The data from Study 5 permitted gauging the impact of personal and national importance on policy preference expression for four issues (abortion, gun control, health care, and trade with Mexico) using multiple measures by estimating the parameters of a covariance structure model.<sup>6</sup> The model fit the data well ( $\chi^2(70) = 102.76, p < .05$ ; RMSEA = .07; standardized RMR = .07; non-normed fit index = .94). Personal importance was a significant predictor of attitude expression ( $b = .38, p < .001$ ), but national importance was not ( $b = .06, n.s.$ ; see column 2 of Table 6.2).

Study 6's data permitted estimating OLS regression coefficients predicting an index of behaviors (attitude expression, financial contributions, and group meeting attendance) with personal and national importance. Personal importance was a significant positive predictor of the behavioral index ( $b = .11, p < .01$ ), whereas national importance was not ( $b = .01, n.s.$ ; see column 3 of Table 6.2).<sup>7</sup>

Study 9's data replicate the findings from Study 6. As columns 4 and 5 of Table 6.2 show, personal importance was a positive, statistically significant predictor of the behavior index for both the Iraq war ( $p = .15, p < .001$ ) and the global warming issues ( $b = .19, p < .001$ ). National importance was not a significant predictor for the Iraq war issue, and was a marginally significantly *negative* predictor of issue relevant behavior regarding global warming.<sup>8</sup>

### **Question 3: Which is More Consequential in Shaping Candidate Preferences—Personal or National Importance?**

Next, we examined the extent to which personal and national importance determine the degree to which citizens' policy preferences influence their attitudes towards candidates. In the OLS regressions shown in Table 6.3 (which use the data from Study 3, in which candidate preference is coded such that larger numbers represent a greater preference for the Republican candidate), a positive, statistically significant interaction between issue distance and personal importance would mean that people who attached more personal importance to the issue placed greater weight on it when formulating attitudes towards the candidates. Likewise, a positive, statistically significant Issue Distance  $\times$  National Importance interaction would mean that people who considered the issue to be more nationally important weighed the issue more heavily.

The expected positive and statistically significant Issue Distance  $\times$  Personal Importance interaction appeared in nine of the twelve analyses (see Table 6.3). In contrast, only two marginally significant, positive interactions between issue distance and national importance appeared, and the remaining coefficients were non-significant. Thus, it appears that a policy issue had more impact on candidate attitudes among people who attached more personal importance to

**TABLE 6.3** Personal and National Importance Moderating the Impact of Policy Issue Distance on Candidate Preference (Study 3)

Predictor	1980					1984					1996	
	Unemp.	Defense Spending	Gov't Services	Guar. Jobs	Soviet Union	Aid to Minorities	Taxes	Gov't Services	Guar. Jobs	Central America	Gov't Services	Aid to Minorities
Issue Distance × National Importance	1.53*** (.39)	.20 (.13)	.49*** (.12)	.35** (.13)	.45*** (.12)	.46*** (.13)	.05 (.12)	.39*** (.12)	.47*** (.13)	.45** (.15)	.54* (.25)	-.14 (.22)
Issue Distance × National Importance	.15 (.24)	.22+ (.12)	.04 (.08)	.07 (.08)	.33+ (.19)	-.16 (.14)	.30 (.22)	.06 (.07)	-.01 (.07)	.03 (.14)	-.13 (.12)	.06 (.11)
Personal Importance	.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.07** (.03)	.03 (.03)	.02 (.02)	-.02 (.03)	.09* (.04)	-.07* (.03)	-.07* (.03)	-.03 (.04)	.14* (.06)	.05 (.05)
National Importance	.00 (.02)	.02 (.03)	-.02 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.07+ (.04)	.01 (.03)	-.10 (.07)	-.05* (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.07* (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.03)
Issue Distance	-.23 (.26)	.13+ (.07)	.05 (.08)	.13+ (.08)	-.05 (.07)	.12+ (.07)	.17* (.07)	-.01 (.09)	.03 (.09)	-.01 (.10)	.05 (.22)	-.27+ (.16)
Male	.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.02)	.03 (.02)	.03+ (.02)	.08** (.02)	.07** (.03)
Age	.05 (.05)	.03 (.04)	-.02 (.04)	.01 (.04)	.01 (.04)	.04 (.04)	.10 (.07)	.03 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.08 (.05)	.03 (.06)	.03 (.06)

continued...



Table 6.3 continued...

Predictor	1980					1984					1996	
	Unemp.	Defense Spending	Gov't Services	Guar. Jobs	Soviet Union	Aid to Minorities	Taxes	Gov't Services	Guar. Jobs	Central America	Gov't Services	Aid to Minorities
White	.14*** (.03)	.18*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	.17*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	.12*** (.03)	.19*** (.05)	.15*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	.18*** (.03)	.07+ (.04)	.06 (.04)
Income	.08* (.04)	.07* (.03)	.07* (.03)	.06+ (.03)	.07* (.03)	.07* (.03)	.07 (.05)	.04 (.04)	.05 (.04)	.07+ (.04)	.00 (.05)	.01 (.05)
Education	-.10*** (.03)	-.04+ (.03)	-.07** (.03)	-.06* (.03)	-.05+ (.03)	-.02 (.02)	-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.03)	-.05+ (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.04)	.03 (.04)
Democrat	-.20*** (.02)	-.20*** (.02)	-.19*** (.02)	-.21*** (.02)	-.21*** (.02)	-.22*** (.02)	-.20*** (.03)	-.24*** (.02)	-.25*** (.02)	-.26*** (.02)	-.30*** (.03)	-.30*** (.03)
Republican	.26*** (.02)	.24*** (.02)	.23*** (.02)	.23*** (.02)	.25*** (.02)	.24*** (.03)	.28*** (.03)	.26*** (.02)	.26*** (.02)	.29*** (.02)	.34*** (.03)	.35*** (.03)
R <sup>2</sup>	.29	.28	.29	.30	.27	.30	.31	.39	.38	.38	.50	.49
N	1540	2066	2034	1981	2045	2097	870	1464	1478	1330	668	664

Note: Table entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

+p < .10    \*p < .05    \*\*p < .01    \*\*\*p < .001

the issue, but attaching national importance to an issue did not enhance its impact on candidate attitudes (logistic regressions predicting vote choice yielded similar results).<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, using Study 4's data (which assessed personal and national importance of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the impact of the issue on candidate preferences), personal importance was a significant predictor of the degree to which respondents said the issue impacted their candidate preferences ( $b = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but national importance was not ( $b = .07$ , n.s.; see column 1 of Table 6.4). And using the data from Study 5 (which assessed personal and national importance and issue impact on candidate preferences for abortion, gun control, health care, and trade with Mexico), personal importance was a significant predictor of issue impact on candidate preferences ( $b = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but national importance was not ( $b = .19$ , n.s.; see column 2 of Table 6.4). These findings therefore replicate Study 3's evidence that national importance judgments are not significant moderators of issue impact on candidate preferences.

**TABLE 6.4** Personal and National Importance Predicting Issue Impact on Candidate Preference—Studies 4 and 5

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Study 4</i>	<i>Study 5</i>
Personal Importance	.47*** (.05)	.47*** (.09)
National Importance	.07 (.04)	.19 (.11)
Male	.00 (.03)	-.01 (.02)
Age	.06 (.04)	.04 (.05)
White	.10* (.04)	
Income	-.06 (.05)	
Education	-.12** (.05)	.04 (.05)
R <sup>2</sup>	.29	.25
N	373	111

Note: Table entries in column 1 are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients and in column 2 are unstandardized coefficients obtained from LISREL. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$       \*\*  $p < .01$       \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Question 4: Which is More Cognitively and Affectively Consequential—Personal or National Importance?**

The data from Studies 6, 7, and 9 allowed assessing the impact of personal and national importance on cognitive issue engagement (indicated by an index of the amount of thought a person gave to issue-relevant information, the amount of issue-relevant knowledge a person had and the certainty of issue attitudes), memory for attitude-relevant information, emotional reactions to information about the issue, and the cognitive accessibility of issue-relevant information.

As can be seen in Column 1 of Table 6.5, the effect of personal importance on cognitive issue engagement in Study 6 was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .32, p < .001$ ), as was the impact of national importance ( $b = .04, p < .05$ ), although personal importance was a much stronger predictor than national importance. The data from Study 9 replicate the personal importance finding, for both the Iraq war and global warming issues. In contrast to Study 6, national importance of the Iraq war was not a significant predictor of cognitive issue engagement ( $b = .01, n.s.$ ), whereas national importance of global warming was significantly *negatively* associated with cognitive issue engagement ( $b = -.12, p < .001$ ).<sup>10</sup>

Data from Study 7 allowed examining whether personal and national importance were related to knowledge accumulation and to emotional reactions by estimating the parameters of a covariance structure model that corrected for random and systematic measurement error.<sup>11</sup> The model fit the data well ( $\chi^2(9) = 8.39, n.s.$ ; RMSEA = .00; standardized RMR = .02; non-normed fit index = 1.01).

The effect of personal importance on memory for the news stories was positive and marginally significant ( $b = .67, p < .10$ ), whereas the effect of national importance was not significant ( $b = -.60, n.s.$ ; see column 4 of Table 6.5). And personal importance was a positive predictor of the extent of emotional reactions to a news story ( $b = .39, p < .05$ ), but national importance was not ( $b = -.18, n.s.$ ; see column 5 of Table 6.5).

Data from Study 9 confirms the emotion findings from Study 6. As columns 6 and 7 of Table 6.5 show, the effects of personal importance of both the Iraq war and global warming were positive and statistically significant ( $b = .18$  and  $b = .21$ , respectively,  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ). Also consistent with Study 6, national importance was not significantly related to emotional reactions for either issue.

Finally, Study 7's data allowed estimating the parameters of a covariance structure model predicting accessibility with personal and national importance.<sup>12</sup> This model fit the data well ( $\chi^2(31) = 36.51, n.s.$ ; RMSEA = .03; standardized RMR = .03; non-normed fit index = .97). As column 8 of Table 6.5 shows, the effect of personal importance on accessibility was significant and positive ( $b = .29, p < .01$ ), but the effect of national importance was not significant ( $b = -.10, n.s.$ ).

**TABLE 6.5** Personal and National Importance Predicting Cognitive and Affective Issue Engagement—Studies 6, 7 and 9

Predictor	Study 6		Study 9		Study 7		Series 9		Study 7	
	Cognitive Engagement Index	Cognitive Engagement Index (Iraq)	Cognitive Engagement Index (GW)	Issue Memory	Emotion	Iraq Emotion	GW Emotion	Emotion	Accessability	
Personal Importance	.32*** (.02)	.29*** (.02)	.30*** (.02)	.67+ (.38)	.39* (.16)	.18*** (.01)	.21*** (.02)	.29*** (.11)		
National Importance	.04* (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.11*** (.02)	-.60 (.43)	-.18 (.17)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.10 (.11)		
Male	.07*** (.01)	.08*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)	-.07 (.01)	-.08*** (.02)	-.01 (.01)	.02*** (.01)	.00 (.01)		
Age	-.04 (.03)	.03 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.03 (.06)	.03 (.06)	-.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.02 (.04)		
White	.03* (.01)	-.01 (.06)	-.01 (.01)	.07*** (.02)	.07*** (.02)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		
Income	.05* (.02)	.02* (.01)	.02 (.01)			.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)			
Education	.13*** (.02)	.09*** (.02)	.16*** (.02)			-.03** (.01)	.01 (.01)			

continued...

Table 6.5 continued...

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Study 6</i>		<i>Study 9</i>		<i>Study 7</i>		<i>Series 9</i>		<i>Study 7</i>	
	<i>Cognitive Engagement Index</i>	<i>Cognitive Engagement Index (Iraq)</i>	<i>Cognitive Engagement Index (GW)</i>	<i>Issue Memory</i>	<i>Emotion</i>	<i>Iraq Emotion</i>	<i>GW Emotion</i>	<i>Accessibility</i>		
Democrat	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.03 (.02)	.02	.09	.14	.18	.04		
Republican	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.03* (.02)	.297	.297	1934	1903	297		
R <sup>2</sup>	.22		.16	.02	.09	.14	.18	.04		
N	1270		1931	297	297	1934	1903	297		

Note: Table entries in columns 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Table entries in columns 4, 5, and 8 are unstandardized coefficients obtained from LISREL. Standard errors are in parentheses.

+ p < .10 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001

The differential effect of personal and national importance on accessibility means that issues that are personally important to an individual are more likely to be at the top of his/her head and therefore more likely to be used when making political judgments (Zaller, 1992) than issues that are perceived to be nationally important. Personal importance is therefore likely to have more effects on other types of attitudes in addition to those we have explored, including policy preferences, attitudes toward government institutions, attitudes toward value tradeoffs, and more (Zaller, 1992).

***Question 5: Do Cognitive or Affective Issue Engagement Mediate the Effects of Personal Importance on Political Behavior?***

Cognitive and/or affective issue engagement may mediate the effect of personal importance on political behavior. Study 6 and Study 9 permitted tests of these hypotheses. Table 6.6 reports the results of OLS regressions predicting political behavior with personal importance, national importance, cognitive issue engagement (Columns 1, 2, and 4), affective issue engagement (Columns 3 and 5) and the control variables. In all models, the direct effect of personal importance is statistically significant, as is the proposed mediator (cognitive or affective engagement). To test whether cognitive/affective engagement is a statistically significant mediator of the effect of personal importance on political behavior, we analyzed the indirect effects using a bootstrap method with bias corrected confidence intervals (95%) developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) using the program PROCESS created by Hayes (2013; see also Hayes, 2009). As Table 6.7 shows, in all cases, the indirect effect was statistically significant (i.e., the confidence intervals do not contain 0). These results are consistent with the conclusion that personal importance impacted all three types of behavioral issue engagement through its impact on cognitive or affective issue engagement.<sup>13</sup>

***Question 6: Does Personal Importance Cause Personal Importance and Vice Versa?***

Does personal importance cause national importance, or vice versa? Data from Study 8 permitted estimating the parameters of a covariance structure model to gauge the lagged causal impact of personal importance on national importance and the lagged causal impact of national importance on personal importance. This model allowed time 1 personal importance to predict time 2 personal importance and allowed time 1 national importance to predict time 2 national importance, reflecting the stability in the constructs over time. After controlling for the stability of the constructs, the only unexplained variance in time 2 personal and national importance judgments represented change in these importance judgments between time 1 and time 2. Therefore, we allowed time 1 personal importance to

**TABLE 6.6** Personal and National Importance Predicting Political Behavior Controlling for Cognitive and Affective Issue Engagement—Studies 6 and 9

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Environment Behavior Index (Study 6)</i>	<i>Iraq Behavior Index (Study 9)</i>	<i>Iraq Behavior Index (Study 9)</i>	<i>Global Warming Behavior Index (Study 9)</i>	<i>Global Warming Behavior Index (Study 9)</i>
Personal Importance	.07*** (.02)	.06*** (.02)	.13*** (.02)	.10*** (.02)	.15*** (.02)
National Importance	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.05* (.02)
Cognitive Issue Engagement	.12*** (.02)	.30*** (.03)		.29*** (.02)	
Emotion			.16*** (.03)		.21*** (.03)
Male	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02* (.01)	.01 (.01)	.03 (.01)
Age	-.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
White	.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)



Income	.02+	.05***	-.04***	-.04***	-.04***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.02)	(.01)
Education	.03*	.03*	.06***	.06***	.10***
	(.01)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Democrat	-.01	-.01	-.02	-.00	-.01
	(.01)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Republican	-.03**	-.02	-.02	-.03+	-.02
	(.01)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.12	.06	.16	.10
N	1270	1931	1924	1911	1903

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001

**TABLE 6.7** Does Cognitive and/or Affective Issue Engagement Mediate the Effect of Personal Importance on Political Behavior?

<i>Study / Mediator</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Bootstrap Standard Error</i>	<i>Bootstrap Lower Level Confidence Interval</i>	<i>Bootstrap Lower Level Confidence Interval</i>
Study 6 / Cognitive	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.05
Study 9 Iraq / Cognitive	0.09	0.01	0.07	0.11
Study 9 GW / Cognitive	0.09	0.01	0.07	0.11
Study 9 Iraq / Affective	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.05
Study 9 GW / Affective	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.06

predict time 2 national importance, and we allowed time 1 national importance to predict time 2 personal importance, in order to estimate the amount of change in the time 2 variables attributable to the time 1 variables. Such lagged effects are consistent with the hypothesis that the time 1 variable caused changes in the time 2 variable (see Kenny, 1979; Kessler and Greenberg, 1981). The model also allowed for correlated errors between time 1 personal and national importance and between the residuals of time 2 personal and national importance.

Time 1 personal importance was a significant predictor of time 2 personal importance ( $b = .42$ ,  $se = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating over-time stability. Likewise, time 1 national importance was a significant predictor of time 2 national importance ( $b = .33$ ,  $se = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Time 1 personal importance was also a significant, positive predictor of time 2 national importance ( $b = .26$ ,  $se = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and national importance at time 1 was a positive and significant but weaker predictor of personal importance at time 2 ( $b = .13$ ,  $se = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating reciprocal causality. Thus, although national importance was a cause of personal importance, national importance was much more a *result* of personal importance.

Note also that the stability over time of personal importance ( $b = .42$ ) is larger than the stability of national importance ( $b = .33$ ). When the parameters of the model were re-estimated constraining these coefficients to be equal, goodness of fit declined marginally significantly ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 2.10$ ,  $p < .10$ ). This reinforces the notion that personal importance assessments are more crystallized than national importance judgments.

The standardized effect of national importance on personal importance was .17, which means that only 3% of the effect of personal importance on behavioral and cognitive issue engagement can be attributed to national

importance. But it is still possible that personal importance mediates the effect of national importance on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional issue engagement. That is, it is possible that national importance causes personal importance, which, in turn, affects issue engagement. If this were the case, then our analyses, because they include both personal and national importance in the same equation, might mask potential effects of national importance. To test this possibility, we re-estimated the effects of national importance not controlling for personal importance (i.e., in the equations reported in Tables 6.2-6.5). National importance had statistically significant effects in only 8 of the 27 equations (plus 1 marginally significant effect), compared to the 23 of 27 statistically significant personal importance coefficients (plus 1 marginally significant effect).

## Discussion

### *The Power of Personal Importance*

When evaluating candidates for public office, making vote choices, and expressing policy preferences directly to elected officials and the news media, citizens are apparently focused primarily on policy issues they consider to be personally important rather than issues they consider to be nationally important (in 74% of our tests of the effect of personal and national importance on political behavior, the personal importance coefficient was statistically significantly larger than the national importance coefficient). Personal importance was a statistically significant predictor of behavioral, affective, and cognitive issue engagement in our tests, whereas national importance rarely was. These results are consistent across a variety of political issues and behaviors, using both open-ended and closed-ended questions to measure importance, and for both representative samples of adults and convenience samples of college students. Had the results of our studies with representative samples of adults been different from the results obtained from convenience samples of college students, more weight should presumably be placed on the studies of general public samples. But since the results are consistent across the two types of samples, we do not need to choose. And our results indicate that the process of conferring cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement on some issues over others is similar for students and non-students alike.

The primacy of personal importance occurs for three reasons. Attaching personal importance to an issue apparently leads people to think extensively about relevant information, to store it in long-term memory, and therefore remember it better. Furthermore, information on personally important issues evokes stronger emotions. And attitudes on more personally important policy issues are held with greater certainty and are more accessible in memory (for a similar finding regarding accessibility, see Lavine et al. 1996). Thus, the roots of policy issue engagement for democratic citizens appear to be in personal importance assessments.

One interesting implication of this conclusion has to do with the political consequences of media agenda-setting and real-world cues indicating problem seriousness. Although these forces can apparently alter judgments of the national importance of issues, the resulting ups and downs of issues on the public's national problem agenda are not especially consequential in their own thinking or action. Another implication of our findings is that in future research, scholars should rely on personal importance measures to identify citizens who are highly engaged in an issue, rather than assuming that saying an issue is nationally important indicate engagement.

### ***The Roots of Personal Importance***

The superiority of personal importance judgments in driving political thinking and action seems especially understandable in light of the differences between the causes of national importance judgments (media agenda-setting and real-world cues) and the causes of personal importance judgments (material self-interest, identification with a reference group or reference individual whose material interests are at stake in an issue or who care deeply about it, or the relevance of a person's core abstract values about how life should be lived (Boninger et al., 1995). Thus, instead of being quickly and sensitively responsive to shifts in news media content and recent events, personal issue importance appears to be rooted in more enduring and thoughtfully generated links between an issue and key elements of a citizen's self-concept and place in the social structure. In this light, it is not surprising that the amount of personal importance an individual attaches to a particular policy issue appears to be much more stable over time (Krosnick, Berent, & Boninger, 1994) than are judgments of the national importance of issues (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985). This sort of evidence is also consistent with the notion that national importance judgments are formed tentatively, change easily, and are not especially psychologically consequential, whereas personal importance judgments are crystallized and revised thoughtfully and gradually and have more potential to shape political cognition and action.

### ***When Might National Importance Be Consequential?***

National importance judgments might be less consequential because citizens form them with only limited confidence, given the complexity of national circumstances and the information burdens inherent in becoming informed about those circumstances. To explore this possibility, we examined the impact of personal and national importance judgments on issue engagement among citizens of differing levels of political sophistication. More sophisticated individuals are more exposed to a range of political information from the media and may therefore be more equipped to form national importance judgments with confidence. More

politically sophisticated citizens may also be socialized to focus their political thinking on national considerations when deciding how to think about and participate in politics. Thus, a positive relation between political sophistication and impact of national importance judgments would not definitively support the “difficulty” explanation, but such a result could lend some initial support to it.

Study 6’s data permitted testing this notion using educational attainment as a surrogate for political sophistication and testing interactions of education with each type of importance when predicting policy preference expression, contributing money, attending a meeting, knowledge, thought, and certainty. None of six interactions involving national importance was statistically significant, meaning that the effect of national importance judgments did not vary with education. One interaction between education and personal importance was statistically significant: personal importance had more impact on knowledge accumulation among less educated citizens. Although education is not an optimal index of political sophistication (Zaller 1990), no evidence suggests that national importance judgments are more consequential among political sophisticates compared to the less sophisticated.

Theories of group processes suggest that perceptions of a group’s circumstances should only be consequential among individuals who identify with the group in some way (e.g., Conover, 1984, 1988; Kramer & Brewer, 1984) and that identification with the nation is likely to be more powerful in some situations than in others (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Smith & Spears, 1996). Therefore, the generally weak effects of national importance judgments we observed might be traceable to relatively weak identification with the nation for most Americans most of the time, perhaps because it is too heterogeneous a group. If this is so, national importance might have a sizable impact on issue engagement among citizens who do closely identify with the nation (e.g., highly patriotic individuals), or in situations when unifying characteristics of the nation are spotlighted (e.g., under circumstances of a national crisis such as a war; see Mueller, 1994).

Perhaps national issue importance judgments do have consequences, but on different outcomes than examined here. For example, perhaps citizens want government to put more effort into addressing nationally important issues, not issues they attach importance to personally. And perhaps aggregations of national importance judgments, measured in widely publicized national surveys, lead politicians to devote more effort to working on a particular issue (see, e.g., Jones, 1994). We look forward to future research exploring these possibilities.

### ***Conflict with Evidence on Economic Voting?***

Some readers might think that the findings reported here are in conflict with those in the literature on the impact of economic beliefs on vote choices, which has consistently shown that people do not use their own personal economic

circumstances to decide whether to vote for or against an incumbent. Instead, people seem to use their perceptions of the nation's economy when deciding how to vote in presidential elections. But the apparent reason for this is applicable only in that context: whereas citizens hold presidents responsible for national-level economic conditions, they see little connection between a president's actions and their own personal economic situations (Feldman, 1982; Lau and Sears, 1981). This reasoning has no clear implications for whether policy issue engagement should result from judgments of national or personal issue importance, so we see no conflict between our findings and those on economic voting.

Put simply, the studies reported here are of a very different phenomenon. Personal importance does not solely reflect material self-interest and instead also reflects values and the concerns of groups with which the individual identifies. Thus, personal importance should not be equated with self-interest. As such, our findings do not contradict evidence that retrospective and concurrent judgments of national economic conditions are much more consequential than such judgments of personal economic circumstances. Likewise, our results do not conflict with Tyler's (1990), which showed that people obey the law not because they fear being personally punished but rather because they perceive the legal system to be legitimate. And our results do not conflict with Mutz's (1998) evidence that an individual's personal experiences of life events have much less impact on political judgments than do perceptions of the collected opinions and experiences of others. Unlike all of these scholars, we are focused on citizens' attitudes toward specific government policy options and the amount of personal importance attached to those attitudes (whether that importance is derived from self-interest, values, or group identity concerns). And in this domain, personal trumps national.

### **Coda**

In 1983, Sheila Rowbotham wrote, "It is still a vexed question as to when the personal is political or the personal remains personal, and how the personal connects with the political" (p. 44). Many years later, much is still left to be understood on this matter. The findings offered here suggest that, at least with regard to policy issue engagement, the personal *is* political. But this is clearly not always the case in politics. We look forward to future research on other aspects of political cognition and action to see how and when the personal connects with the political and when these two arenas remain separate and unconnected.

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## Appendix: Measures and Variable Coding

### Studies 1 and 2

#### *Personal Importance*

Respondents were asked two questions to assess the personal importance of a series of issues (Study 1: capital punishment, Central America, abortion, and defense spending; Study 2: defense spending, the environment, drug abuse, taxes, and school bussing): 1) How important to you personally is the issue of (x)? (Not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, extremely important); and 2) How concerned are you personally about the issue of (x)? (Not at all concerned, not too concerned, somewhat concerned, very concerned, extremely concerned). Responses were coded to range from 1–5, where 1 = not at all and 5 = extremely.

#### *National Importance*

Respondents were asked two questions to assess the national importance of the same issues about which personal importance was gauged: 1) How important for the country as a whole is the issue of (x)? (Not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, extremely important); and 2) How concerned should the country as a whole be about the issue of (x)? (Not at all concerned, not too concerned, somewhat concerned, very concerned, extremely concerned). Responses were coded to range from 1–5, where 1 = not at all and 5 = extremely.

### Study 3

#### *Respondents' Policy Attitudes*

In the NES surveys, respondents were asked to report their attitudes on many policy issues, and on some issues, respondents were also asked how important

the issue was to them personally, measures that were required for our analyses. In 1980, suitable data were collected on the issues of defense spending, spending on government services, guaranteed full employment, relations with the Soviet Union, aid to minorities, taxes, and the tradeoff between combating inflation and combating unemployment. In 1984, suitable data were collected on the issues of spending on government services, guaranteed full employment, and U.S. policy in Central America. The policy issues suitably addressed in the 1996 NES were spending on government services and aid to minorities. All policy attitudes were coded to range from 0–1.

The labels on the end points of these policy attitude rating scales were: Defense spending: 0 = greatly decrease, 1 = greatly increase; government services: 0 = reduce spending a lot, 1 = no reduction in spending; guaranteed employment: 0 = government should assure a job and good standard of living for everyone, 1 = government should let each person get ahead on his own; Soviet Union: 0 = try very hard to get along with Russia, 1 = do not try too hard to get along with Russia; aid to minorities: 0 = government should help minority groups, 1 = minority groups should help themselves; taxes: 0 = no tax cut, and 1 = cut taxes by 30%. Inflation/unemployment: 0 = reduce inflation even if it means large increases in unemployment, 1 = reduce unemployment even if it means large increases in inflation; Central American: 0 = much more U.S. involvement in Central America, 1 = much less U.S. involvement in Central America.

### ***Perceptions of Candidates' Policy Attitudes***

After reporting their attitudes toward each policy, respondents were asked to report their perceptions of the two major presidential candidates' policy attitudes on the issue. The response options for these questions were the same as those used to gauge respondents' attitudes and were coded to range from 0 to 1.

### ***Personal Importance***

In 1980, respondents were asked how important it was to them that the federal government continue what it was doing or change what it was doing so that it stayed close to or came closer to their own position on the issue, on a 0-100 scale. Following Krosnick (1988a), we rescaled this variable such that 0–59 = 0, 60–89 = .33, 90–99 = .66, and 100 = 1. In 1984, respondents were asked how important it was to them that the federal government do what they thought was best on the issue—not important at all, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important (coded 0, .33, .66, and 1, respectively). In 1996, respondents were asked how important the issue was to them—not important at all, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important (coded 0, .25, .5, .75, and 1, respectively).



### ***National Importance***

All respondents were asked to list what they thought were the most important problems facing the country. Up to three responses were recorded from each respondent in 1980 and 1984, and in 1996, up to four responses were recorded. A respondent was coded 1 if he or she considered an issue to be nationally important and was coded 0 otherwise.

Responses to the open-ended most important problem questions were coded into a series of standard categories in the NES datasets. In 1980, the unemployment codes were 10, 11, 12, 19, 400, 401, 402; defense spending codes were 700, 710, 711, 712, 713, and 719; government services codes were 10, 11, 12, 119, 20, 21, 22, 29, 30, 31, 32, 39, 40, 41, 42, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 90, 91, 92, 414, 415, and 837; guaranteed jobs codes were 10, 11, 12, 19, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 90, 91, 92, and 405; Soviet Union codes were 530, 531, 532, 533, and 539; aid to minorities codes were 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 90, 91, 92, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 310, 311, 312, 317, 318, and 319; taxes codes were 416, 417, and 418 (see Miller, 1980). In 1984, government services and guaranteed jobs codes were same as in 1980; Central America codes were 514, 550, 551, 552, 559, 560, 561, 562, 569 (see Miller, 1984). In 1996, government services and aid to minorities codes were the same as in 1980 (see Rosenstone et al., 1996).

Although NES questions measured policy preferences and personal importance regarding abortion in 1980, women's rights in 1984, and abortion, defense spending, and the environment in 1996, we could not use these issues for our analyses, because too few people listed these issues as nationally important. In 1980, only 6 people mentioned abortion. In 1984, only 18 people listed women's rights. And in 1996, only 35 people listed defense spending, 13 people listed abortion, and 98 people listed the environment.

### ***Candidate Preference***

Respondents were asked to report their attitudes toward the two major presidential candidates on 101-point feeling thermometers. Preferences were indexed by subtracting ratings of the Democratic candidate from ratings of the Republican candidate and rescaling the resulting variable to range from -1 (meaning a respondent strongly favored the Democratic candidate) to +1 (meaning the respondent strongly favored the Republican candidate). Respondents with no preference between the candidates were coded 0.

### ***Control Variables***

Interviewers recorded respondents' gender (coded 1 = male, 0 = female). Respondents reported their race (coded 1 = white, 0 = nonwhite), age (coded

in years to range from 0 to 1), education (0 = no high school diploma, .33 = high school diploma, .66 = some college, and 1 = at least a BA degree), and their total household income from the previous year (in 21 income categories, coded to range from 0 to 1). Party identification was represented by two variables, one coded 1 for Democrats and 0 for everyone else, and the other coded 1 for Republicans and 0 for everyone else.

### ***Issue Proximity***

To represent the relative distance between each respondent's attitude toward a policy and the candidates' attitudes toward the policy while avoiding confounding due to projection, we computed net spatial distances using each national sample's average perception of each candidate's attitude to approximate his or her true attitude (see Krosnick, 1988a; Markus, 1982; Markus, & Converse, 1979; Page, 1978) as follows:

$$|R's \text{ attitude} - \text{mean Democratic candidate attitude}| - |R's \text{ attitude} - \text{mean Republican candidate}| \quad (1)$$

The resulting issue distance scores ranged from  $-1$  to  $+1$ . Positive numbers indicated that the respondent's issue position was closer to the Republican candidate's, and negative numbers indicated that the respondent's position was closer to the Democratic candidate's. Respondents whose attitudes were equidistant from the two candidates received scores of 0 on this measure.

## **Study 4**

### ***Personal Importance***

Respondents reported how important the Arab–Israeli conflict was to them personally, as compared to other political issues (not among the five issues they personally considered most important, one of the five most important issues, one of the two or three most important issues, or the single most important issue, coded 0, .33, .66, and 1, respectively).

### ***National Importance***

Respondents were asked how important the Arab–Israeli conflict was for the security and welfare of the United States as a whole (not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important, coded 0, .33, .66, and 1, respectively).

### ***Issue Impact on Candidate Preferences***

Respondents were asked to identify their favorite presidential candidate during the 1988 primary season. Then, they were asked how important their views on the Arab–Israeli conflict were in determining which of the candidates was their favorite (not among the five most important issues, one of the five most important issues, one of the two or three most important issues, or the single most important issue, coded 0, .33, .66, and 1, respectively).

### ***Expressing Policy Preferences to Politicians or the News Media***

Respondents were asked if they had ever written a letter, made a telephone call, or done anything else to express their views on the Arab–Israeli conflict directly to a government official, newspaper, or magazine. People who had were coded 1, and people who had not were coded 0.

### ***Control Variables***

Interviewers recorded respondents' gender (coded 1 = male, 0 = female). Respondents reported their race (coded 1 = whites and 0 = nonwhites), age (coded to range from 0 to 1 from the youngest to oldest), education (0 = no high school diploma, .25 = high school diploma, .50 = some college, and .75 = college graduate, 1 = at least some postgraduate education), and total household income (9 categories, coded to range from 0 to 1 from lowest to highest income).

## **Study 5**

### ***Personal Importance***

Respondents were asked two questions for each of four issues (abortion, gun control, health care, and trade with Mexico) to assess personal importance: how important the issue was to them personally (not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important) and how personally concerned they were about the issue (not at all concerned, not too concerned, somewhat concerned, very concerned, or extremely concerned). Answers to both questions were coded to range from 0 to 1, with higher numbers meaning more importance.

### ***National Importance***

Respondents were asked two national importance questions for each issue: how important the issue was for the country as a whole (not at all important, not

too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important), and how concerned the country as a whole should be about the issue (not at all concerned, not too concerned, somewhat concerned, very concerned, or extremely concerned). Again, answers to these questions were coded to range from 0 to 1, with higher numbers meaning more importance.

### ***Issue Impact on Candidate Preferences***

Respondents were asked to identify their favorite presidential candidate during the 1992 campaign. They were then asked how important their opinions on each of the issues were in determining which of the candidates was their favorite (not among the five most important issues, one of the five most important issues, one of the two or three most important issues, or the single most important issue, coded from 0 to 1).

### ***Expressing Policy Preferences to Politicians or the News Media***

Respondents were asked if they had ever written a letter, made a telephone call, or done anything else to express their views on each of the four issues directly to a government official, newspaper, or magazine. Respondents who said they had were then asked how many times they had done so. People who said they had never expressed their attitudes were coded 0; people who had done so once were coded .5; and people who had done so more than once were coded 1.

### ***Other Variables***

Interviewers recorded respondents' gender (coded 1 = male, 0 = female), and respondents reported their education (coded 0 = not a high school graduate, .25 = high school graduate, .5 = some college, .75 = college graduate, 1 = post-college) and their age (coded to range from 0 to 1).

## **Study 6**

### ***Personal Importance***

Respondents were asked how important global warming was to them personally (not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important, coded from 0 to 1).

### ***National Importance***

Respondents were asked how serious of a problem they thought change in the world's climate is likely to be for the country (no problem at all, slightly serious, pretty serious, very serious, or extremely serious, coded from 0 to 1).

### ***Expressing Policy Preferences to Politicians or the News Media***

Respondents were asked whether, during the four months prior to the interview, they had written a letter to a public official expressing their views about global warming. People who had were coded 1, and those who had not were coded 0.

### ***Financial Contributions to Lobbying Organizations and Attending Group Meetings***

Respondents were asked whether, during the four months prior to the interview, they had given money to an organization that was concerned with global warming (coded 1 for yes and 0 for no) and whether, during the four months prior to the interview, they had attended a group meeting to discuss global warming (coded 1 for yes and 0 for no).

### ***Knowledge Accumulation, Prior Thought, and Opinion Certainty***

Respondents were asked how much they felt they knew about global warming (nothing, a little, a moderate amount, or a lot, coded from 0 to 1), how much thinking they had done about global warming before the interview (none at all, hardly any, a moderate amount, or a lot, coded from 0 to 1), and how sure they were of their opinions about global warming (not sure at all, slightly sure, somewhat sure, very sure, or extremely sure, coded from 0 to 1).

### ***Control Variables***

Interviewers recorded respondents' gender (coded 1 = male, 0 = female). Respondents reported their race (coded 1 = whites and 0 = nonwhites), age (coded in years to range from 0 to 1), education (0 = no high school diploma, .33 = high school diploma, .66 = some college, and 1 = at least a BA level degree) and total household income (using 9 categories that were coded to range from 0 to 1). Party identification was represented by two variables, one coded 1 for Democrats and 0 for everyone else, and the other coded 1 for Republicans and 0 for everyone else.

## Study 7

### *Personal Importance*

Respondents were asked two questions to assess personal importance. First, they were asked to list up to three policy issues that were most important to them personally. A coder who had no other information about the respondents read their answers and recorded whether they mentioned each of the target issues (crime, unemployment, and pollution). For each target issue, we then created a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent had mentioned the issue (coded 1) or had not (coded 0).

Respondents also reported the importance of each target issue to them personally (not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important, coded from 0–1).

### *National Importance*

Respondents were asked both an open-ended and a closed-ended question to assess the national importance of the target issues in the respondents' opinions. First, they were asked to list up to three policy issues that were the most important for the country. Second, they were asked to rate how important each issue was for the country as a whole (not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important). Answers to these questions were coded in the same fashion as were answers to the personal importance questions.

### *Attitude Accessibility*

Accessibility was gauged using procedures developed by Fazio (1990). When seated at the computer, respondents evaluated President Bill Clinton's handling of each target issue twice and evaluated his handling of nine other issues once each. On each trial, the name of an issue appeared in the middle of the screen, and respondents pressed one of two buttons, labeled "approve" and "disapprove." The length of time between the appearance of each issue name and the pressing of a button was recorded by the computer.

Response times less than 501 milliseconds (so fast that respondents probably accidentally pressed a button or did not read the issue name) and greater than 7000 milliseconds (so slow that respondents probably were not concentrating exclusively on the task) were considered to be invalid measurements. We therefore treated these as instances of missing data and created our measures of accessibility using the remaining valid measurements from each respondent

(see Fazio, 1990). On average, only 7 respondents out of the total of 385 failed to provide valid accessibility data on each item.

After subjecting the response times to a reciprocal transformation (to normalize the distributions), the response times of the two evaluations of presidential performance on each target issue were averaged. To control for differences between people in the speed with which they made all judgments, the mean response time for the nine filler issues was subtracted from the mean response time for each target issue (Fazio, 1990). The resulting three scores were then standardized to place them all on a common metric (unconfounded by differences in the familiarity of the issue labels); larger numbers indicated greater accessibility.

### ***Knowledge Accumulation***

The paper-and-pencil questionnaire asked respondents to think back to the news stories they saw and to describe the stories that stood out most in their minds. A coder who had no other information about the respondents counted the number of stories about the target issue that each respondent correctly recalled. Virtually all respondents were able to recall one of the two target stories he or she saw, so we classified people who remembered both target stories as having evidenced better memory (coded 1) than those who remembered either one or none (coded 0).

### ***Emotions***

Respondents were given a list of eight emotions (angry, sad, disgusted, proud, hopeful, happy, afraid, and sympathetic) and were asked to indicate which they had felt while watching the two target stories. To create an index of the volume of emotional reactions a respondent had, we summed the number of emotional reactions each respondent reported feeling during the two target stories (ranging from 0 to 16) and rescaled the resulting index to range from 0 to 1.

### ***Control Variables***

Respondents reported their gender (coded 1 = male, 0 = female), age (coded to range from 0 to 1), and race (coded 1 = whites, 0 = nonwhites).

## Study 9

### *Personal Importance*

Respondents were asked how important the issues of global warming and the Iraq war were to them personally, in separate questions (not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, or extremely important, coded from 0 to 1).

### *National Importance*

Respondents were asked how important the issues of global warming and the Iraq war were for the country as a whole, in separate questions (not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, or extremely important, coded from 0 to 1).

### *Expressing Policy Preferences to Politicians or the News Media*

For each of the two issues (Iraq war and global warming), respondents were asked how many times during the last year they wrote a letter, made a telephone call, or did anything else to express their opinion about the issue to a government official, newspaper, magazine, or on a webpage on the internet. People who responded “0 times” were coded 0. All other respondents were coded 1.

### *Financial Contributions to Organizations*

Respondents were asked how much money they had contributed to an organization working on the issues of the war in Iraq and global warming during the last year (in separate questions). Respondents who said that they had not contributed any money were coded 0, and respondents who had contributed money, regardless of amount, were coded 1.

### *Working with Organizations*

Respondents reported how many hours during the last year they worked with an organization that is working on the issues of the war in Iraq and global warming (in separate questions). Responses were coded such that 0 = 0 hours and 1 = 1 or more hours.



### ***Attending Group Meetings***

Respondents reported how many times during the last year they attended a group meeting to talk about the Iraq war and global warming issues (in separate questions). Responses were coded such that 0 = 0 time and 1 = 1 or more times.

### ***Knowledge Accumulation, Prior Thought, and Opinion Certainty***

For each of the two issues, respondents were asked how much they felt they knew about the issue (nothing, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal, coded from 0 to 1), how much thinking they had done about the issue (none, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal, coded from 0 to 1), and how sure they were of their opinions about the issue (not sure at all, slightly sure, somewhat sure, very sure, or extremely sure, coded from 0 to 1).

### ***Emotions***

Respondents were asked: When you think about what people have been doing and saying in recent years about the issue of the war in Iraq [global warming], how angry [hopeful, afraid, proud] do you feel (not at all, slightly, moderately, very, or extremely)? Responses were coded to range from 0 to 1.

### ***Control Variables***

Gender was coded such that 1 = male and 0 = female. Respondents reported their race (coded 1 = whites and 0 = nonwhites), age (coded in years to range from 0 to 1), education (0 = no high school diploma, .25 = high school diploma, .50 = some college, .75 = BA degree, and 1 = graduate or professional degree) and total household income (coded such that 0 = below US\$35,000 and 1 = US\$35,000 or above). Party identification was represented by two variables: one coded 1 for Democrats and 0 for everyone else, and the other coded 1 for Republicans and 0 for everyone else.

### **Notes**

- 1 This research was conducted partly while the second author was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, funded by NSF Grant SBR-9022192. The study of public opinion on global warming was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (Grant SBR-9731532), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Ohio State University and was sponsored by Resources for the Future. Jon Krosnick is University Fellow at Resources for the Future. The authors would like to thank Paul Beck for his encouragement and advice and Paul Goren,

John Bullock, Neil Malhotra, Daniel Schneider, and Lori Gauthier for their helpful comments and suggestions.

- 2 These figures come from a search using www.jstor.org of the *AJPS* between 1973 and 2002, the *APSR* between 1906 and 2000, the *BJPS* between 1971 and 1998, the *JoP* between 1939 and 2000, *PB* between 1979–1998, and *POQ* between 1937 and 1999. “Salience” appeared in the title or abstract of 76 of these articles, and 47 of them dealt specifically with the salience of policy issues in the minds of citizens, which is our current focus.
- 3 Some studies failed to find effects of personal importance in regulating issue impact on vote choice (e.g., Aldrich, Niemi, Rabinowitz, & Rohde, 1979; Beardsley, 1973; Grynaviski & Corrigan, 2006; Hinckley, Hofstetter, & Kessel, 1974; Jackson, 1979; Niemi & Bartels, 1985), but Krosnick (1988a) identified a series of aspects of the analytic methods used in those studies that are likely to have masked the importance effects.
- 4 For each issue, we specified two latent substantive factors: personal importance (how personally important the issue was and how personally concerned the respondent was about it) and national importance (how important the issue was for the nation and how concerned the country should be about it). The latent factors were permitted to correlate freely with one another. To account for correlated measurement error shared by pairs of questions involving the same response scale (due to people’s idiosyncratic interpretations of the response options; see, e.g., Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968), two method factors are included (see Alwin & Krosnick, 1985; Boruch & Wolins, 1970). The Importance Method Factor was a cause of answers to the questions with a response scale ranging from “not at all important” to “extremely important” (both were constrained to load 1.0 on that factor). The Concern Method Factor was a cause of answers to the questions with a response scale ranging from “not at all concerned” to “extremely concerned” (both were constrained to load 1.0 on that factor). Since LISREL analyzed a variance-covariance matrix, constraining the method factor loadings to be equal and estimating the variances of those factors amounts to assuming that each method factor creates a constant amount of variance in all indicators it affects. The method factors were not allowed to correlate with each other or with the substantive latent factors (see Judd & Krosnick, 1982; Krosnick & Alwin, 1988; Widaman, 1985). The metric of each substantive latent factor was set by fixing at 1.0 the loading of the question using the word “importance,” and estimating all other loadings.
- 5 An RMSEA of .05 or less indicates the model is a good fit to the data; .051–.08 indicates acceptable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992). A non-normed fit index of .95 or more indicates good fit, as does a standardized RMR of .08 or less (Hu & Bentler, 1998).
- 6 The two personal importance questions were treated as indicators of a personal importance latent factor for each issue, and the two national importance questions were indicators of a national importance latent factor for each issue. To correct for systematic measurement error, we allowed for correlated error between the personal and national importance questions that asked about *importance* of the issue, and between the personal and national importance questions that addressed *concern* about the issue. The latent personal and national importance factors, along with the demographic control variables, were allowed to be correlated with one another, and were used to predict the issue’s impact on expressing preferences on the issues to politicians or the news media. To obtain single coefficients for the effects of personal and national importance on each outcome variable, we constrained the effects of personal and national importance to be equal across issues.

- 7 Results are similar when we examine each behavior separately—personal importance is a significant predictor and national importance is not.
- 8 Results are consistent when we examine each behavior separately.
- 9 In this study, the personal importance measure was a closed-ended question, and the national importance measure was an open-ended question, so the use of an open-ended question might have handicapped the performance of national importance here. But other studies here used closed-ended measures of national importance, and they fared no better.
- 10 Results are similar when we examine the cognitive engagement variables separately.
- 11 The two personal importance questions for the issue about which each person viewed target news stories (because the memory and emotion measures asked them only about the target news stories they had viewed) were treated as indicators of a latent personal importance variable for the issue, and the two national importance questions were treated as indicators of a latent national importance variable. Thus, for each respondent, only the personal and national importance questions regarding their randomly assigned target issue were used to predict memory and emotions. The latent personal and national importance factors and the demographic controls were allowed to be correlated with one another. To correct for systematic measurement error, we allowed for correlated error between the open-ended personal and national importance questions and between the closed-ended personal and national importance questions.
- 12 This analysis focuses on all three issues for each respondent. The two personal importance questions for each issue were treated as indicators of a latent personal importance variable for each issue, and the two national importance questions for each issue were treated as indicators of a latent national importance variable for each issue. The latent personal and national importance factors and the demographic controls were allowed to correlate with one another. The effects of personal importance and national importance on accessibility were constrained to be equal across issues to yield single, efficient tests. To correct for systematic measurement error, we allowed for correlated error between the open-ended personal and national importance questions and between the closed-ended personal and national importance questions.
- 13 We also estimated the parameters of less theoretically plausible models changing the causal sequence. For example, one model proposed that personal importance was the independent variable, behavior was the mediator, and cognitive issue engagement was the outcome variable. Another model proposed that behavior was the independent variable, personal importance was the mediator, and cognitive issue engagement was the outcome variable. These and all other such models produced evidence of significant mediation. The available data do not provide a basis for discriminating among these various models in terms of their plausibility.