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Learning from Politics? The Causal Interplay between Government Performance and Political Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Most models of public opinion assign a fundamental role to ideological predispositions. Moreover, the literature usually portrays ideology as a stable phenomenon at the individual-level, one that is mainly shaped by socio-economic class experiences and pre-adult socialisation, and that is likely to grow stronger in intensity – rather than change – over the life-course. However, less is known about the scope of, or reasons for, ideological change in adult life. This paper uses Swedish panel data to investigate the interrelation between evaluations of government performance and ideological left–right related orientations. There is some support for 'the socialisation school', in that ideological positions and values display considerable short-term stability, although less stability over a four-year period. Moreover, there is evidence of short-run selective perception, with those close to the government at t_1 being more likely than others to form more positive performance perceptions between t_1 and t_2. Interestingly however, over a four-year period this tendency was not statistically significant. Moreover, there is also clear support for a 'revisionist' interpretation of left–right ideology. Such orientations do change at the individual level, according to how people perceive incumbent government performance, an impact which does not depend on political sophistication.

Most models of public opinion and political behaviour assign a fundamental role to ideological predispositions, such as left–right self-identification and general attitudes towards state intervention.[1] By virtue of guiding citizens through the political information flow, allowing them to take shortcuts to (hopefully) informed choices, ideological orientations rank among the more powerful determinants of political attitudes and behaviour, not least in Western Europe.

Because of their important political effects, there has been plenty of research on the antecedents of political predispositions. With some

exceptions, the literature portrays ideology as a quite stable phenomenon at the individual-level, one that is mainly shaped by socio-economic class experiences and pre-adult socialisation, and that is likely to grow stronger in intensity – rather than change – over the life-course.

However, surprisingly little is known about the extent of and reasons for ideological change in adult life. Therefore, this paper looks closer at citizens' evaluations of government performance and policy outputs as potential explanations for adult political learning. Are citizens able to learn from politics by updating their ideological left–right related orientations in the light of perceived public policy outputs, so that those who evaluate outputs positively are more inclined than others to move towards the government's ideological position? Or are evaluations of government performance merely creations of already firmly held ideological orientations?

Such questions are best addressed using individual-level longitudinal panel data. Specifically, I draw on the 1998 and 2002 waves of the Swedish election study, which contain short-term as well as long-term panel data. In addition, I analyse the 2002 Swedish Electronic Panel, a five-wave web-based non-random panel sample, which was partly collected specifically for the present purposes. These data contain multiple measures of both ideological orientations and government performance perceptions.

In doing this, I try to make a small contribution to filling a quite large knowledge gap: we know surprisingly little – given the by now gargantuan dimensions of the research field – about *how and why citizens' ideological orientations change in adult life*. This state of affairs is not entirely easy to understand, as there has been so much research on the sources, the nature, and the effects of general political orientations. As we shall see, we know a lot about how pre-adult socialisation lays a foundation for these orientations (Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Westholm 1991), and there has been much research on their socio-economic bases in adult life (see Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992; Svallfors 2006). Likewise, we know much about the internal structure of such orientations, especially when it comes to left–right related orientations, as well as about how orientations affect voting behaviour, and interact into political information processing (Kinder 1998). Also, we know that general political orientations are relatively stable, so there is certainly not an infinite amount of change in adult life to be explained (Sears and Funk 1999).

Socialisation theory versus the revisionist school

This paper contrasts two competing models: *socialisation theory* and the *revisionist school*. It is a special case of a larger political science debate on

whether orientations, behaviour, and outcomes, are best explained by exogenous and deeply entrenched 'cultural variables' or whether they are better described as products of institutions and policies emanating more directly from the current political system (Jackman and Miller, 1996; Mishler and Rose 2001).

Specifically, the socialisation school views political predispositions as stable phenomena that are mainly the results of formative experiences in childhood or adolescence, where the most proximate and important cause is social contagion of parents' and friends' predispositions. People acquire their predispositions and political values from other people in their social vicinity (Niemi and Jennings 1991; Westholm 1991). According to the socialisation school orientations tend to become emotionally strong and charged with feelings of identity; they are more likely to be reinforced and grow stronger, than actually change, later in life. An important motor of this reinforcement is usually some variant of selective perception, a process in which citizens perceive short-term political events, social trends, issues, and candidates in ways that harmonise with, and thus strengthen, already held predispositions.[2] This may apply not the least to citizens' perceptions of policy outputs and government performance. As formulated by Rose and McAllister (1990: 141) in a study of British voters, 'what a party does in office is not judged afresh; it is judged in the light of a lifetime of political learning. [. . .] a person who has right wing economic values is likely to be predisposed to give a favourable judgement of the Conservative government's economic record, and a person favouring left-of-centre values to be critical. In particular, durable values enable those predisposed to favour a Conservative government by a lifetime of learning to excuse objectively poor performance my misperceiving the evidence, or by concluding that a Labour government would have done even worse . . .'.

Because predispositions, according to the socialisation school, are more likely to grow stronger than transform, attitudinal change at the aggregate level is mainly explained by generational replacement rather than by individual volatility. Examples of theories that subscribe to these basic assumptions include the Michigan model of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960), Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism (1977), and Sears' (1993) theory of symbolic politics. In addition to research on inheritance factors proper, there are many studies on how predispositions are affected by the usual socioeconomic suspects, most notably class. Many of these studies, too, tend to endorse the basic axioms of socialisation theory, in that class effects are often interpreted in terms of inheritance, social contagion, habit, stability, affection, and the like (Svallfors 2006).

Such results have helped foster the widespread view that ideological support arises mainly on 'the input side' of the democratic process. Not least the theoretical heritage of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) suggests that ideological orientations function as stable psychological mediators of social cleavage effects on political behaviour. In other words, ideological orientations depend on what exogenous social cleavages exist in a society, where the individual is located in the cleavage structure, and on which cleavages with their associated ideological dimensions are emphasised by parties in the input-phase of the democratic process. In the face of the resulting political conflicts on the input-side of democracy, individuals usually end up in the ideological camps that are suggested by their stable and often inherited cleavage locations. And socialisation processes are believed to play an important part in creating this political stability.

Revisionism in empirical micro-level research

Socialisation theory stands in contrast to what may be called *the revisionist school*. It maintains that basic political orientations are not just affective and stable results of early socialisation. They are also subject to rational updating in adult life. As explained by Niemi and Jennings (1991: 970) in a study on party identification, 'partisanship is endogenous to political preferences, changing over the years in response to the events of a single presidential campaign [. . .] Likewise, the inheritance of partisanship from one's parents is not absolute – or altered only by catastrophic events at the time of coming of age – but is affected by evolving issue preferences, expected benefits, and transactions with the political environment throughout adulthood'.

Revisionism has been most commonplace in America. In particular, a vigorous research programme has been devoted to investigating the extent to which party identification – a political predisposition originally believed to be mainly, though not entirely, created by early socialisation (Campbell et al. 1960) – is affected by issue stands and retrospective evaluations of government performance in adult life (see Converse 1975; Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Franklin 1984; Luskin, McIver and Carmines 1989; Miller and Shanks 1996).[3] Other examples of revisionism include the finding that both the degree of 'materialism' (Inglehart 1981) and the level of welfare state support grows in times of recessions (Pettersen 1995; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003), as well as results showing that citizens' adult-life personal experiences with welfare state institutions and public services affect political ideology and trust (Soss 1999; Kumlin 2004).

The latter two studies highlight the fact that factors related to public policy outcomes and government performance have been somewhat

neglected in the study of political behaviour generally. As nicely explained by Mettler and Soss (2004), it is commonplace to divide political behaviour research field into three broad theoretical perspectives: There is the 'sociological' tradition, which explains political orientations and behaviour in terms of communication and socialisation within social groups and contexts; there is the 'psychological' tradition that looks more to individual values and identifications; and there is the 'economic' tradition which focuses on self-interest and individual rationality.

In spite of their many differences, these three perspectives have an important feature in common: they try to explain behaviour and orientations in terms of factors that are exogenous to political institutions and public policies. There is little room in these schools of thought for policy feedback, that is, the possibility that the social groups, values, and interests that structure citizens' thoughts and actions on the input side of political systems are in turn partly products of the outcomes of previous democratic processes. Therefore, Mettler and Soss (2004: 1) argue, 'aside from some notable exceptions, political science has had little to say about the consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship'. They try to remedy this problem by discerning a more 'political' perspective emphasising institution- and public policy-oriented explanations. After a period of mainly theorising (Pierson 1993; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Rothstein 1998) the political/institutional perspective has recently inspired a series of empirical studies (Soss 1999; Mishler and Rose 2001; Mettler 2002; Mau 2003; Kumlin 2004; Campbell 2005; Kumlin and Rothstein 2005).

Revisionism in theoretical macro-level research

In addition to these empirical examples of, and calls for, revisionism, there is a recent theoretical literature stipulating that the policy output of the political system matters greatly for the popular legitimacy of policies, politicians, and political systems. For instance, scholars such as Schneider and Ingram (1997) and Rothstein (1998) have argued that welfare state support depends, not only on the degree to which it satisfies people's self-interest, but also on the extent to which policies and programmes are implemented and distributed in ways that harmonise with justice norms among the population (see also Mau 2003; Kumlin 2004).

Similarly, in the discussion of the democratic shortcomings of the EU, Scharpf (1999) has invoked the notion of 'output legitimacy' to explain how European integration and EU policies could be democratically justified. The idea is that because there are no European institutions offering meaningful political participation or electoral accountability,

because there is no well-developed European public discourse, and because there is no common European identity allowing for painful majority decisions, it will take a long time before the EU can aspire to legitimacy on the input side of the democratic process. However, Scharpf argues, the EU can be defended in democratic output terms to the extent that its policies create political results and output that are conducive to more or less consensual goals adhered to by Europeans. Now, such legitimisation is problematic at present, according to Scharpf, because EU institutions are still much better at market liberalisation (negative integration) than at market correction (positive integration). Therefore, it is important that institutional and legal reforms are undertaken so as to smooth the creation of European market-correcting policies, as well as to protect national social policies. Perhaps then – in spite of all its shortcomings on the input side of the democratic process – the EU would nevertheless be, and be perceived as, democratically legitimate (for critical reviews, see Moravcsik and Sangiovanni 2003).

Clarifying the political time of our lives

While the micro implication of these macro theories seems to be exactly the revisionist claim that individuals have a capacity to update political orientations in the light of new information about government performance, the empirical validity of that implication is rarely considered. Macro theorists rarely explicate the micro implications on which their theories seem to depend. Similarly, the revisionist school does not seem to have had great impact on the empirical study of political predispositions generally; notwithstanding the prominent examples of empirical revisionism cited above, particularly those of party identification in the US. This is especially true with respect to left–right ideology in Europe, a state of affairs that is not satisfying as such orientations are arguably the most influential political predisposition on this side of the Atlantic (Budge, Crewe and Farlie 1976; Berglund et al. 2005). Thus, one would like to know more about why, when and how Europeans change left–right ideological orientations in adult life.[4]

Granted, almost all researchers acknowledge the crucial impact of basic predispositions in the opinion formation process. But more often than not, these are assumed to exist rather than constituting the actual dependent variable in an empirical analysis; they are assumed at the outset to be the results of some half-mystical process that has occurred in the past and that is now to a great extent finished. John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992) is perhaps the most influential example: 'The sources of variability in individuals' political predispositions are

beyond the scope of this book. My assumption, however, is that predispositions are at least in part a distillation of a person's life-time experiences, including childhood socialisation and direct involvement with the raw ingredients of policy issues, such as earning a living, paying taxes, racial discrimination, and so forth. Predispositions also depend on social and economic location and [. . .] on inherited and acquired personality factors' (Zaller 1992: 23). After having made such assumptions, researchers typically go on to investigate how predispositions affect opinion formation, information processing, voting behaviour, or some other important topic.

Against this backdrop, Sapiro has made a call for political scientists to 'clarify the political time of our lives'. She explicitly argues that researchers are often too content with the sweeping assumption that basic political orientations are the results of pre-adult socialisation, or of the usual socio-economic suspects like class, education, and income: 'As studies of electoral politics show, even some basic political identities such as partisanship can change during adulthood. Common sense, or at least experience, also suggests that we should look more closely at adulthood for political learning. It is difficult to believe that those things that seem so important to day-to-day-experience would not affect our political persona: major life events, dramatic or persistent interaction with social institutions outside the family, the experience of historical events and changes, the biological process of ageing and the cumulative impact of acting, thinking, and being acted on over time. Nevertheless, rummaging through the relevant literature shows little coherent development of theory about political development over the life course' (Sapiro 1994: 200–13). Consequently, she calls for more 'conceptual and theoretical work in order to improve our understanding of the political implications of life course development, especially if we are to move beyond the notion of life course indicators as an untheorised set of ''demographic'' or ''background'' variables'.

Hypotheses and research strategy

Inspired by the discussion above, this paper tests one particular hypothesis about adult ideological updating, the extent to which people have a capacity for drawing ideological conclusions from government output and performance. The prediction is that people have a capacity for ideological learning from the results achieved by responsible political actors of various ideological denominations. Depending on how results and output are perceived, and depending on the perceived ideological stance of the villains and heroes respectively, people may update their own ideological orientations accordingly. As we will see in the concluding

section, the results have implications, not only for how we think about individual-level opinion change, but also for how we may think about ideological conflict.

Measures of government performance perceptions have been employed as an independent variable in numerous previous studies, especially in economic voting (for an overview, see Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000), and in some studies of political trust (Holmberg 1999; McAllister 1999). Researchers in the field of economic voting usually include ideology as control variables in their models, assuming that ideology could influence both vote choice and performance perceptions, whereas they usually do not consider the possibility that performance has an indirect impact through ideology. Of course, if this would turn out to be the case, the ideology controls employed in models of economic voting would seem tough in the extreme, with a potential to unduly attenuate the effects of the economy on the vote.

In contrast to such studies, we use ideology as the dependent variable. We test the hypothesis that people have a capacity to gradually learn from political results throughout their life courses; that they consider, not only who is responsible, and punish and reward actors directly, but that some of them also think about what ideology lies behind poor and bad performance. And if performance is perceived benevolently they may become more likely to endorse the ideology – or, in operational terms to move closer to the ideological position of the actor that is perceived to be responsible for results. Conversely, if performance is perceived unfavourably, they may move farther away from the actor that is perceived to be responsible for results. In this way, the outcomes of previous public policies may continuously feed back into the predispositions that citizens will bring into subsequent political battles on the input side of democracy.

There is by now a handful of studies indicating that evaluations of government performance are related to ideological orientations (Kumlin 2004) as well as political trust (Holmberg 1999; Miller and Listhaug 1999; Huseby 2000). While these are valuable contributions, they have typically employed cross-sectional data. This is potentially problematic as the socialisation school – with its emphasis on selective perception - would lead us to expect that it is in fact political orientations that govern performance evaluations, not the other way around. Consequently, this paper utilises panel data with both short and long term timelags to investigate the causal interplay between evaluations of government performance and ideological orientations. We hope to find out, not just the extent to which performance evaluations cause changes in ideology, but also whether ideological orientations have a reciprocal impact on performance evaluations.

The first test

In order to examine the extent to which election campaigns function as sites of ideological learning, I will first draw on the *Swedish 2002 Electronic Panel*. This is a five-wave internet-based survey collected during the 2002 election campaign using a non-probability sample of e-mail addresses (see the appendix for more information).

Figure 1 shows the results of a cross-lagged OLS regression model estimating effects on post-election absolute ideological distance to the governing party as well as on post-election perceptions of government performance. The independent variables are pre-election lagged versions of the same variables. Because we analyse effects of one independent variable on another while controlling for the lagged version of the dependent variable, we are in effect examining effects on change in the dependent variable. Thus, the analysis allows us to say something about what affects what in the arguably reciprocal relationship between ideology and perceptions of government performance.

The ideological distance variables were obtained by calculating the absolute distance between (1) the respondent's left–right self-location on a 0–10 scale at each wave, and (2) the respondent's initial perception of the governing Social Democrats' location on the same scale.[5]

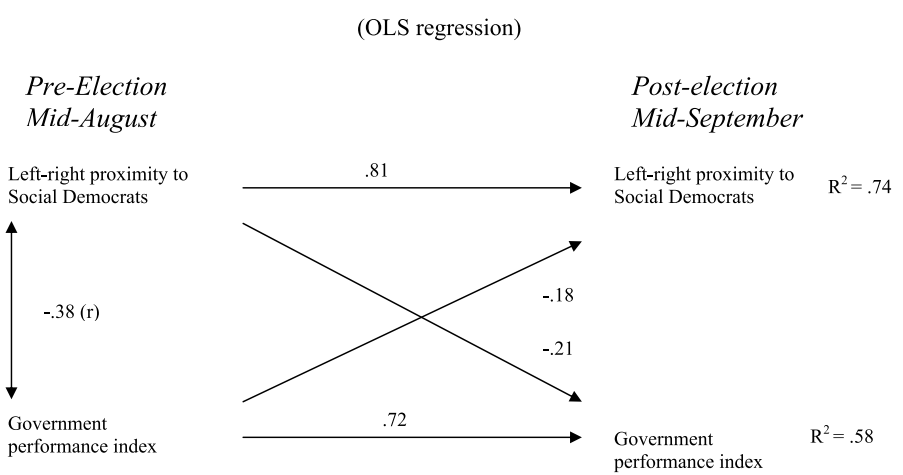

FIGURE 1: *Dynamic relations between perceptions of government performance and left–right distance to the governing party*

Source: The data came from the Swedish 2002 Electronic Panel. All variables vary between 0 and 10. All coefficients are significantly different from zero at $p < .001$. See main text for further information about variable construction. $N = 256$.

Perceived government performance is measured by an additive index summing up responses to six items with the following head question: 'What is your opinion about the political results that have been achieved since the 1998 election'. Respondents answered along a 10-point scale ranging from −5 (very bad) to +5 (very good). The index was constructed on the basis of six highly intercorrelated[6] items concerning 'the Swedish economy', 'schools and education', 'health care', 'refugees and immigration', 'law and order', and 'unemployment'. The index was scored between 0 and 10 with higher values representing more positive performance perceptions.

The results show that these variables tap phenomena that were rather stable throughout the course of the campaign. This is especially true for the ideology variable (b = 0.81), but also for the government performance index (b = 0.72) As the socialisation perspective would lead us to expect, then, attitudinal and cognitive stability is an important feature of the data.

But ideological change is also present. And what is more, this change can to a certain extent be accounted for by our independent variables. For example, people who at the start of the campaign were located at the same ideological distance from the government, but who evaluated government performance differently, developed differently with respect to ideology. More exactly, controlling for initial ideological distance, each additional step towards more positive performance evaluations along the 11-point index is estimated to tighten the ideological gap between oneself and the government by 0.18 along the 11-point ideological distance variable.

Having noted this partial support for the revisionist perspective, it is also evident that the data appear to fit the selective perception hypothesis: Controlling for initial performance perceptions, smaller ideological distance to the government is predicted to bring about more positive performance perceptions (− 0.21). This result, too, is consistent with the socialisation school's clear emphasis on selective perception governed by stable orientations. Of course, we should probably not interpret all of the impact of ideology on performance evaluations as support for the socialisation school as the data suggest that ideology at t_1 was partly shaped by previous performance evaluations.

In sum, it seems to be justified to say that both our theoretical perspectives receive support. The socialisation perspective receives support in the sense that ideological orientations are highly stable, and in the sense that performance perceptions are in part projections of already held ideological orientations. The revisionist perspective receives support in the sense that government performance evaluations have a systematic impact on the ideological change that nevertheless does take place during an election campaign.

Perceptual assimilation or genuine ideological change?

But there is a complication. The ideological variable in the analysis above is really not ideology as such, but rather ideological distance to a party. Hence, it is a compound of attitude and perception, and we can therefore not be completely sure of our interpretation that performance perceptions have stimulated real ideological change. In fact, it is perfectly conceivable that it is peoples' perceptions of the location of the governing party that have changed, rather than their own ideological positions. This is to say that those who judge performance favourably may be prone to draw the government closer to themselves, rather than move in the direction of the government as we have hypothesised. If this is true, good government performance does not persuade people that the ideology of the government is more valuable and effective than they thought. Rather, good performance makes people infer that the government must really have implemented their own preferences after all.

These remarks are inspired from findings in the field of political perception where scholars have noted the presence of an 'assimilation' effect. That is, there is a tendency for citizens to adjust perceptions of liked actors so that the perceptions become more positive (Granberg and Holmberg 1988; Granberg 1993; Krosnick 2002). Arguably, assimilation effects would support the socialisation school rather than the revisionist perspective, as the former emphasises selective information processing rather then actual attitude change.

As questions about party locations were asked in only one of the waves we are ill-equipped to test for the presence of an assimilation effect. What we can do, however, is to examine whether people do change their own positions along the left–right scale in the directions predicted by our hypothesis. To this end, I estimated effects on post-election ideological position – rather than on ideological distance to the government – using pre-election ideological positions and pre-election performance evaluation as independent variables. Further, this model was estimated separately among people to the left and right of the government respectively.

Interestingly, and consistent with the revisionist perspective, the results show that among people to the right of the government, positive performance evaluations indeed cause people to shift their own ideological positions to the left; that is, in the direction of the government ($b = -0.18$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 150$). Conversely, and equally supportive of the revisionist perspective, among those to the left of the government positive performance produces ideological shifts to the right; again, in the direction of the government ($b = 0.13$, $p = 0.125$, $n = 70$). These results strengthen the revisionist interpretations of the data in Figure 1. It seems

that good performance makes the ideological distance to the government shrink somewhat mainly because people adjust their own ideological position, not that of the government.

Does government performance affect substantive political values?

Thus far, I have examined and spoken about left–right self-placement as though it were an unproblematic measure of ideological orientations for our purposes. But this is not true. It has at least one feature that makes us want to consider an alternative conceptualisation and measurement strategy.

That feature consists of the possibility that answers to questions about left–right self-identification reflect, not so much ideology, but rather respondents' party preferences. This interpretation is typically referred to as the 'partisan component' of left–right self-identification (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Knutsen 1998). According to this interpretation, people who say that they stand 'far to the left' have inferred their position from their party preference, or mean that they support a leftist party. However, this partisan component does not necessarily reveal much about policy-related values or attitudes. This is not entirely satisfactory because we do not know whether it is the ideological component or the party component (or both) that has been affected by performance evaluations. And of course, our purpose here is exactly to shed light on ideology effects, rather than effects on party preferences like in literature on economic voting.

Fortunately, left–right self-placement is not the only way to conceptualise and measure ideological orientations. A viable alternative is to try to measure more directly the substantive value conflicts inherent in the left–right conflict. If we find that perceptions of government performance affect, not just positions along the left–right scale, but also substantive political values, one would feel safer in concluding that performance indeed shapes the ideological component in left–right ideology as we have posited. If it is true that people who judge political results favourably move closer to perceived responsible political actors, one may expect positive government performance to make people more likely to endorse leftist values (as the Swedish Social Democratic government is by and large thought to be defenders of the public sector).

Here, I will focus on 'left–right economic values'. This value dimension reflects what is still a very important component in the left–right conflict throughout much of Western Europe. It can be defined as a conflict over the extent to which the market economy should be allowed to operate freely in society, and conversely the extent to which the public

sector should be allowed to expand, thus assuming responsibility for, and intervening into, capitalist market processes and outcomes (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Knutsen 1995; Oscarsson 1998).

In both the pre- and post-election waves, economic left–right values were measured by combining the following three opinion items into an additive index: 'spend more on the public sector', 'cut the taxes', and 'introduce more private health care', which were measured using a 5-point likert scale ranging from 'very good suggestion' to 'very bad suggestion'. The resulting index was scored between 0 and 10 where higher values represent more support for state intervention and the public sector.[7] Finally, analogous with the model in Figure 1, the economic left–right value index was included together with the previously used government performance index in a cross-lagged panel model. Results can be inspected in Figure 2.

Much as in the previous analysis, both our theoretical perspectives receive some support. As proponents of the socialisation school would expect, political values remain rather stable throughout the election campaign (b = 0.86), and perceptions of government performance are affected by economic left–right values with people to the left being more likely to judge performance favourably (b = 0.13). On the other hand, in support of the revisionist school, government performance has an impact

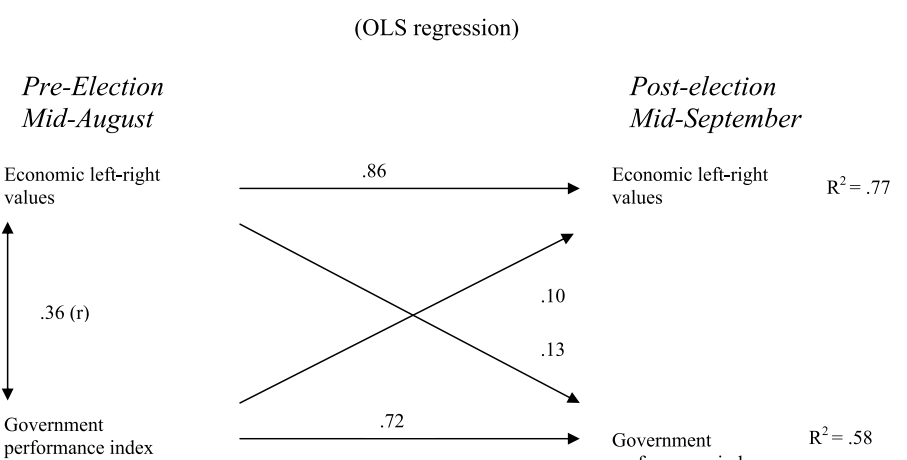

FIGURE 2: *Dynamic interrelation between perceptions of government performance and economic left–right values*

Source: The data came from the Swedish 2002 Electronic Panel. All variables vary between 0 and 10. All coefficients are significantly different from zero at p < .001. See main text for further information about variable construction. N = 721.

on short-term value change. Among people with the same initial values, one step of change along the government performance scale is predicted to bring about 0.10 units of change along the 10-point value index.

There is a twofold methodological significance of the results in Figure 2. First, they imply that it is not just the party component in left–right ideology that is affected by perceptions of government performance; substantive political values also change in the face of such perceptions. Second, the results provide further support for the revisionist prediction that good or bad government performance respectively are not merely reasons to assimilate perceptions of government ideology to previously and firmly held personal ideological positions. Rather, the results signal that perceptions of good and bad government performance stimulate genuine ideological change.

Ideological learning: for political junkies only?

So far we have drawn on a non-probability sample. For reasons explained in the appendix, this sample consists mainly of highly educated and politically interested individuals, and so conclusions cannot automatically be generalised to the population at large. We now turn to the question of whether such generalisation is safe.

It could be unsafe as it has been suggested that politically sophisticated individuals are better, not only at applying political values to political choices, but also at actually updating values themselves in the face of new information. The more familiar individuals are with more abstract value-laden concepts, and the more aware they are of the value-related implications of new information, the more likely that information should be to bring about value change. This hypothesis has been put forward not least by scholars interested in testing models of on-line (or 'impression-driven') updating of political attitudes (Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau 1995; Lavine 2002).

We first use the 1998 Swedish Election Study.[8] This nation-wide, representative probability survey contained a short-term panel component, where pre-election respondents were later sent a short mail questionnaire. The 1998 study is useful for our purposes as two items tapping economic left–right values were included in the pre-election interview as well as in the post-election mail questionnaire: 'reduce the public sector', and 'lower taxes'. They were combined in an additive index varying from 1 to 9, where higher values represent more leftist values.

As far as measures of government performance are concerned, we are somewhat less fortunate compared to the electronic panel used above.

For example, there is no t_2 data on perceptions of government performance, making it impossible to investigate reciprocal effects of values on such perceptions. What we can do, therefore, is to examine effects of performance on value change between t_1 and t_2.

Government performance perceptions were measured by two questions. One asked how 'the Social Democrats have done as a government party since the 1994 election'. The other asked 'how the non-socialist parties did between the 1991 and 1994 elections'. Answers were given along an 11-point scale ranging from −5 (badly), through 0 (neither well nor badly), to +5 (good). Our measure was created by calculating the difference between the two scores. Specifically, a person who thinks the Social Democrats have done a perfect job, and thinks the last non-socialist government performed terribly gets the value +10. Conversely, those who think the Social Democrats were a disaster, but found the non-socialist performance extremely satisfying, receive the value −10. The advantage with this measure – which we call 'relative government performance' – is that it comes closer than before to what should really be the independent variable here. It taps, not only perceptions of past performance of the incumbent government, but rather a more fine-tuned comparison of the past performance of the major ideological alternatives in Swedish politics, *relative to each other*. Of course, our hypothesis is that ideological change occurs when this difference is large.

Table 1 shows the estimates of a regression analysis where economic left–right values at t_2 (post election) constitute the dependent variable. Not surprisingly, such values once again turn out to be quite stable orientations (b = 0.68). However, the results show that perceptions of relative government performance also seem to affect ideological stands among the Swedish population at large. The more favourably the incumbent leftist government is perceived relative to the former non-socialist government, the more likely adult individuals are to subsequently change their political values in a leftist direction (b = 0.11). A

TABLE 1: *Regression analysis of post-election economic left–right values (OLS)*

Economic left–right values at t_{-1} (pre-election)	0.68***
Relative government performance	0.11***
Political sophistication	0.06
Political sophistication × relative government performance	0.02
Constant	1.43***
Adjusted R-squared	0.59
Number of respondents	734

*** = p<0.001; ** = p<0.01; * = p<0.10

Comment: The data come from the 1998 Swedish Election Study.

rough indication that this effect is indeed substantively significant is given by the fact that its standardised regression coefficient (0.21) amounts to one-third of the very strong impact of values at t_1 (0.63).

Moreover, a multiplicative interaction term that lets the effects of performance perceptions vary with political sophistication shows a slight positive but non-significant interaction effect ($b = 0.02$; $p = 0.28$), suggesting that ideological learning is not more common among the politically sophisticated. In conclusion, therefore, learning from political results does not seem to be merely an esoteric hobby for political junkies.[9]

Interestingly, this finding is consistent with previous studies on ideological orientations in Western Europe. Whereas American scholars, beginning with Converse (1964), have often reported strong interaction effects of political sophistication into the extent of ideological thinking and voting, other studies have indicated that this interaction effect is weaker in Western European political systems with strong and stable patterns of party-driven ideological conflict (Granberg and Holmberg 1988; van der Eijk, Franklin and Oppenhuis 1996; Kumlin 2001). It seems that in such systems, of which Sweden must be seen as a prime example, even politically uninformed and unsophisticated citizens are relatively good at applying – and, according to our results, also at *updating* – left–right-related ideological orientations.

Long-term effects?

The analysis so far has built on panel data with short time-lags collected during a single election campaign. Hence, the impact of performance perceptions on ideological change that has been discovered concerns rather short-term changes measured during a rather unrepresentative period in citizens' political lives.

Of course, a revisionist perspective on ideological orientations not only implies short-term effects during a single campaign. It also implies that depending on what government performance looks like, and depending on who is deemed responsible, people actually do learn ideological lessons of a lasting character. In other words the effects should be long-term. A revisionist perspective is hardly supported if performance perceptions only have a capacity to make people briefly deviate from their normal positions, which are presumably the results of pre-adult socialisation, and to which people in that case return after the election is over.

So before proceeding to the concluding section, we shall address the question of how long-term the uncovered effects really are. The analyses in Figures 3 and 4 take advantage of the long-term panel component in the design of the Swedish election studies, where about half of the 1998

respondents were re-interviewed in the 2002 election study. This gives us the opportunity to investigate the extent to which perceptions of relative government performance affect ideological positions four years later.

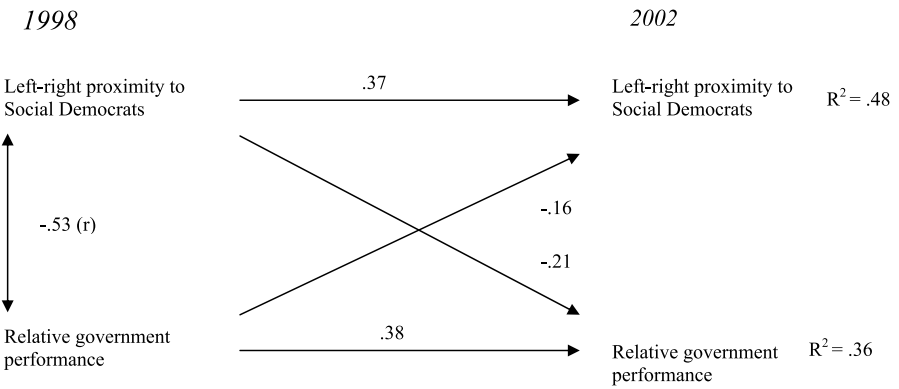

FIGURE 3: *Dynamic interrelation between perceptions of government performance and left–right distance to the governing party (OLS)*
Source: The data came from the Swedish 1998/2002 Election Studies. All coefficients are significantly different from zero at $p < .001$, except the effect of 98 left–right distance on 02 perceptions of relative performance ($p = .098$). See main text for further information about variable construction. $N = 127$.

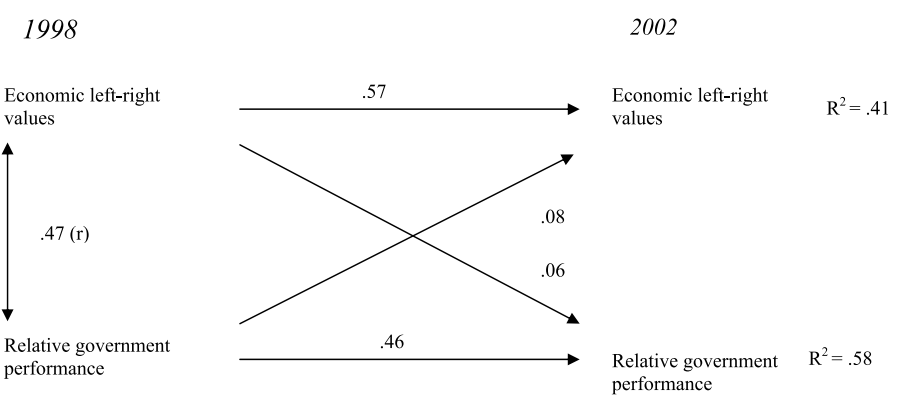

FIGURE 4: *Dynamic interrelation between perceptions of government performance and economic left–right values (OLS)*
Source: The data came from the Swedish 1998/2002 Election Studies. All coefficients are significantly different from zero at $p < .001$, except the effect of 98 values on 02 government performance perceptions. See main text for further information about variable construction. $N = 134/269$.

First, there is still support for the socialisation school. Both proximity to the government (0.37) and economic left–right values (0.57) are stable phenomena. Notice, however, that the stability coefficients for the four-year time lag are clearly weaker than the ones yielded by the campaign panels with roughly four-week lags. This could be partly due to the fact that most of our short-term data drawing on a sample of unusually political citizens. Still, comparing with the one short-term analysis that did build on representative data (Table 1) also indicates a deterioration in stability over time (from roughly 0.70 to 0.57). Making the reasonable assumption that this stability drop captures the beginning of an ongoing linear process, it seems that the well-known tendency for stability in basic orientations is anything but absolute in this case, and that there is indeed room for change late in life.

Also, perceptions of relative government performance are somewhat affected by already held ideological orientations (− 0.21 and 0.06), but none of these effects are statistically significant at $p = 0.05$. In other words, whereas there was support for the selective perception hypothesis in the short-term campaign study, a panel data set with a four-year time lag does not yield as clear support for the contention that performance perceptions are guided by already held ideological orientations.

The results support the revisionist hypothesis in the sense that positive evaluations of relative government performance in 1998 are positively and significantly associated with moving closer to the government's ideological position over the next four years. Specifically, the more favourably the leftist government was perceived in 1998 relative to the former non-socialist government, the more likely people were to become closer to the government along the left–right scale (− 0.16), as well as to gain more positive attitudes to the public sector and high taxes ($b = 0.08$).

Finally, a comparison with the results in Table 1 may be instructive. This table reported that the short-term impact of relative government performance on change in left–right values was 0.11. Now Figure 4 tells us that the long-term impact is roughly the same (0.08). Hence, most of the short-term ideological change that is stimulated by performance perceptions during an election campaign lingers on four years later. On the other hand, no further impact is gained over the longer haul. Rather, it appears as if it is mainly during election campaigns that people learn ideological lessons from perceived political results.

Political implications

We began by contrasting two rather different perspectives on the origins of political predispositions. The socialisation school maintains that predispositions are formed in childhood and early adulthood, and that

they are usually strengthened rather than changed later in life as they provide a perceptual screen protecting from uncongenial information. In contrast, according to the revisionist perspective predispositions are open to change later in life as a function of (among other things) evaluations of government performance.

Our analysis reveals some support for the socialisation school. First, consistent with much previous research, left–right ideological positions and values display considerable short-term stability, but somewhat less stability over a four-year period. If we had been able to examine longer time spans here, it is likely that such analyses would show even more ideological movement. Second, the socialisation school is supported also in that we have found some evidence of short-run selective perception: ideology at t_1 affects how people perceive government performance, with those close to the government at t_1 being more likely than others to form more positive performance perceptions between t^1 and t^2. Interestingly however, over a four-year period this tendency was not statistically significant.

Moreover, we found rather clear-cut support for central revisionist predictions. Left–right ideology does not only change at the individual level: this change can also be systematically accounted for by how people perceive the political results that the incumbent government has achieved compared to how they see the results of an alternative government. Positive views on performance draw people closer to the ideology that is perceived to lie behind the success. Negative views on performance make people shy away from the ideology that is suspected to lurk beneath the mess. The outcomes of public policies thus seem to provide feedback for a continuous and gradual revision of political predispositions.

The results tell us something about how to think about major ideological dimensions in West European polities. According to the classic view – usually associated with Lipset and Rokkan (1967) – ideological positions can be understood as psychological mediators of social cleavage effects on political behaviour. According to this view, the party system politicises social cleavages by establishing a number of ideological conflict dimensions, each of which are associated with one (or several) social cleavages. For example, according to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), the most politically important cleavages in industrial society were the religious cleavage and the class cleavage respectively. The religious cleavage is usually associated with a moral-conservative ideological dimension, whereas the class cleavage is connected to the economic left–right values that have been analysed in this paper. According to the classic view, people's ideological positions are explained by their own location in various cleavages, by what cleavages are emphasised by parties and interest organisations, and by how good the latter are at

mobilising support in 'their' social strata (for an overview, see Brooks, Manza and Bolzendahl 2003).

Certainly, our results do not indicate that the standard view is wrong. But they suggest that left–right values can be more than just mediators of cleavage and socialisation effects: that they express more than just stable social location and the socialisation processes that one has gone through within one's social or cultural environment; and that they depend on more than the social and political cleavages that are fed into the democratic system. Indeed, given that the results presented here will hold in subsequent tests, it seems that the classic interpretation of values and ideology can be fruitfully complemented by the notion they are also expressions of how the political system has performed in practice.

According to this notion, the reason why the Swedish electorate has always stood relatively far to the left is not (only) that the Social Democrats and the trade unions have been successful in mobilising the working class and most of the lower middle class (see Korpi 1983), something that presumably included making those groups socialise their children into further leftist support. An additional explanation would be that leftist support emerged because things like the economy and the welfare state institutions were perceived to work in a satisfactory manner throughout a long period of post-war Social Democratic rule. Expressed more generally, the contention would be that the masses can be won over to one's own ideological side, not only by means of a good organisational infrastructure, but also by means of satisfactory public policies and outcomes. In short, ideological support can be built, not only on the input side of the democratic process, but also on the output side (see Rothstein 1998; Scharpf 1999).

This complementary interpretation of ideology is attractive as the traditional social class cleavage has lost some of its political significance, both at the micro level (Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992), as well as politically (Evans 1999). At the same time, there is much evidence that the ideological dimension created by the class cleavage – left versus right – is still a very powerful predisposition that governs political attitudes and behaviour in Western Europe (van der Eijk, Franklin and Oppenhuis 1996). Of course, in the face of these results it becomes even more important to increase our understanding of the antecedents of left–right ideology as it is still an important political factor, whereas the old underlying explanations work worse than they once did.

Finally, if performance shapes orientations it becomes important – for researchers and for policymakers – to better understand the nature of evaluations themselves. Whereas macroeconomic performance evaluations seem shaped by a mixture of actual unemployment levels, economic growth, and inflation (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000), the nature of

performance evaluations of especially public services and welfare state arrangements are not well understood. This is not to say that we are lacking theoretical ideas, nor scattered empirical findings. A very preliminary synthesis of past research would suggest that welfare state performance evaluations are driven by some mixture of pure self-interest and justice-related concerns. As for the latter, citizens are assumed to evaluate distributive and procedural justice aspects of welfare state provision, in a manner that is independent of what is suggested by their self-interest (Tyler 1990). Indeed, there are indications that citizens are to some extent concerned with 'reciprocity' between welfare state benefactors and beneficiaries (Mau 2003). The solidarity of the former appears partly contingent on whether certain behavioural and attitudinal norms are met by welfare beneficiaries. Other findings suggest that it matters whether citizens perceive that they have 'voice-opportunities' in their interaction with the welfare state and public services (Kumlin 2004), and whether they feel that public resources are distributed to 'deserving' social groups (van Oorschot 2000).

While such findings are certainly valuable, we also need research designs that explicitly pit theories of self-interest against theories of social justice in order to compare their explanatory power. Such studies will reveal the contents of the lessons that citizens learn from political outputs, lessons they bring with them in the form of updated predispositions as the democratic process carries on.

APPENDIX: Description of the 2002 Swedish Electronic Panel

This web-based five-wave panel survey was initiated by Henrik Oscarsson, Department of Political Science, Göteborg University, and carried out by him together with the present author. Ulrika Jessen functioned as a research assistant. The survey was funded by the research project Mechanisms of Democracy, which is in turn financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

The waves were collected as follows. Each wave lasted one week, during which one or two reminders were sent out on Wednesday and Friday. The election took place on Sunday, September 13; polling stations closed at 8 pm.

Wave 1	Saturday August 17, noon – Sunday August 25, midnight
Wave 2	Sunday August 25, midnight–Sunday September 1, midnight
Wave 3	Sunday September 1, midnight–Sunday September 8, midnight
Wave 4	Sunday September 8, midnight–Sunday September 13, 8pm
Wave 5	Sunday September 13, 8pm–October 1

The sample does not remotely resemble a representative sample (see Jessen, Kumlin and Oscarsson 2003). For instance, 49 per cent of respondents have university degrees, and another 17 per cent have studied at that level. 66 per cent are men and 34 per cent women. The age distribution, however, is quite similar to that of the general population with the exception that there are very few respondents over 75 years of age. Further, only 25 per cent stated that they were not interested in politics compared to 46 per cent in the pre-election module of the 2002 Swedish Election Study. As for party preferences, there is an under-representation of Social Democrats (10 percentage points), and an over-representation of liberals (7 percentage points) and greens (3 percentage points).

The sample was generated as follows. First, invitations to participate in the electronic panel were sent to about 10,000 Swedish e-mail addresses that we collected from the Internet. More exactly, our main strategy was to use search engines such as Google to get addresses representing the various occupation categories used by the Swedish Election Study Program.

The addresses of consenting respondents were handed over to Websurvey, a Göteborg-based company specialised in web-based questionnaires (see http://www.websurvey.nu). Websurvey then emailed respondents before each wave, emails in which it was possible to click on a link that automatically opened the respondent's web browser and took him or her to the first page of the questionnaire.

About 11 per cent of the approximately 10,000 email addresses accepted participation. This may sound low, but the response rate would in all likelihood have been much higher if we could have sent reminders to people who did not respond immediately. However, reminders were impossible due to spamming regulations. All these features of the data collection mean that we have a rather unrepresentative sample at hand, and results will preferably have to be replicated using representative samples, which is done in the paper. Having said this, the great advantage with the web-based procedure is that it is a very cheap and very flexible way of collecting extensive panel data with a large number of respondents. Moreover, the purpose of this paper is not to make descriptive inferences about variable *levels* (which can be assumed to be greatly affected by the sampling bias), but rather to test causal hypotheses about *effects* of one variable on another. Of course, experience tells us that effect estimates are often less sensitive to the sampling bias than variable levels. Therefore, it seems relevant to make use of the data set in question.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to Henrik Oscarsson and Ulrika Jessen for pleasant and fruitful cooperation on the 2002 Swedish Electronic Panel. I have also received useful comments from the participants in the seminar on Elections, Public Opinion, and Democracy at the Department of Political Science,

Göteborg University, as well as from my colleagues in the research project on The Political Sociology of the Welfare State. Finally, this research received financial support from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research.

2. In fact, virtually all successful theories of mass political preferences have, in some form, and to some extent, incorporated the notion of resistance or selective perception. For instance, in the Michigan model of voting behaviour, 'Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation' (Campbell et al. 1960: 1333). Likewise, more recent models subscribe to the axiom that 'People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions' (Zaller 1992: 44). For an introduction, see Eagly and Chaiken (1993: 595–9).
3. In a somewhat different vein, Searing, Schwartz, and Lind (1973) argued that the political relevance of early socialisation in the US is limited by the fact that although predispositions may be founded early in life, they often fail to constrain policy opinions later in life. This criticism is arguably somewhat less relevant in many Western European contexts as ideological constraint of concrete attitudes and behaviour has been reported to be more pronounced there.
4. This should not be seen as a criticism against some unnamed scholars that are somehow denying altogether that systematic political learning in adult life is going on, and that it is not worthwhile to explore the issue further. Rather, the point is that such ideological learning in adulthood seems under-theorised and under-researched compared to other important questions related to political orientations. Systematic knowledge about political learning in adulthood is therefore not accumulating as it should in a cumulative research program (for similar points, see Sigel, 1989; Sapiro 1994).
5. The question about party locations was asked once in the second panel wave. Admittedly, it would have been better to include the party location in the first wave, as it is possible that people who perceive government performance favourably tend to move the governing party closer to their own ideological position, rather than shift their own ideological position in the direction of the governing party.
6. Cronbach's alpha varied between 0.82 and 0.90 over the five panel waves.
7. Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 for the pre-election wave and 0.79 for the post-election wave.
8. The Swedish Election Studies are carried out by The Swedish Election Studies Program at the Department of Political Science, Göteborg University, and headed by Sören Holmberg and Henrik Oscarsson. More information about the Swedish Election Study Program is available at www.valforskning.pol.gu.se.
9. The political sophistication scale was generated by saving the first factor from a principal components factor analysis (explained variance 61%). One of three indicators was a variable counting correct answers among seven questions about which party seven different politicians belong to. In the factor analysis, this variable (loading 0.77) was used together with the following two questions: '*to what extent do you read news and articles about politics in daily papers*' (0.77) and '*generally speaking, how interested are you in politics*' (0.80).

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