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News Media's Role in the Issue-Voting Process: News Attention, Issue Proximity, and Vote Choice

Ki Deuk Hyun¹ and Soo Jung Moon²

Abstract

Synthesizing research documenting the effects of news use on learning and evaluation of policy issues, this study explores the role of news media in the issue-voting process, which involves cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral elements. Data analysis from the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) shows that news attention predicts issue importance, issue knowledge, and perception of closeness on issue positions for one presidential candidate over another, which relates to vote choice. Results also indicate that the role of news attention for issue voting tends to be stronger among political independents highly attentive to news media than for others.

Keywords

issue proximity, issue voting, news, presidential election

A standard form of voting in a democracy requires voters to align their policy preferences with competing candidates' policy platforms. Such ideal policy-conscious voting, called *issue voting*, motivates candidates to respond to public concerns and encourages elected officials to fulfill their campaign promises. Because the idea of issue voting presumes a rational electorate and responsive government, it is praised as superior to voting decisions based on candidate images or usual party affiliation.¹

Studies have identified key individual characteristics relating to issue-voting behavior. Compared with those who are less affected by issue considerations, issue voters tend to be better educated, as well as more politically informed and involved.²

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While voters' political resources, or lack thereof, have drawn considerable scholarly attention in the issue-voting literature, the role of news media in this type of voting process has been relatively neglected. Considering that the idea of issue voting is premised on an informed electorate, news media as a main source of campaign information deserve scholarly attention.

In addition, recent documentation of growing polarization in U.S. politics adds another important dimension to the discussion of the media's role in issue voting. One strand of thought in support of rising issue voting has been anchored on the assumption of an increase of a politically independent and better-educated public in Western democracies who may bypass party cues and rely instead on news media to make autonomous voting decisions based on issue-relevant information.³ In the United States, the number of political independents has continued to increase over several decades, reaching its highest level in recent years. In a 2012 survey, about 38% of respondents reported themselves to be independents, almost doubling from 19% in 1940 and showing a noticeable growth from 30% in 2000.⁴

However, a growing body of research suggests a countertrend: that partisan tendencies, in the form of polarization, have risen among the U.S. electorate over the last few decades.⁵ Diversity of information sources along with growth of selective exposure⁶ further complicates the relationship between news media and audience political orientations in issue voting. These changes in the political and media environments require us to re-examine how voters' partisanship and media use interact to affect issue voting.

Previous studies provide scattered evidence suggesting the potential influence of news use on issue voting. News use has been found to contribute to public perception of issue importance⁷ and issue knowledge.⁸ Media emphasis on issues has also been associated with candidate evaluation and voting behaviors.⁹ Theoretical efforts to connect these findings under the overall framework of issue voting, however, have rarely been made.

To address this oversight, we examine the relationship between individual news use and the issue-voting process. Based on the traditional view of issue voting as a multiplicative series of actions,¹⁰ we argue that news media have an important function in this process—increasing voters' issue-importance perception, enhancing issue knowledge, and aiding voters' calculation of congruence between their own policy preferences and competing candidates' policy stands (issue proximity)—all of which should consequently translate into voting choices. We also examine whether news use has a stronger association with issue voting among political independents than among partisans, consistent with the image of issue voting as an autonomous electoral choice that relies on information obtained mainly from news media. For an empirical test, we analyzed data from the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES).

Literature Review

Conditions of Issue Voting

Although issue voting is touted as an ideal voting type in a representative democracy, early voting studies reported that only a minority of the public satisfied the criteria

necessary for issue voting. Most voters lacked basic preconditions such as issue interest and knowledge, stable policy preferences, and ability to link their policy orientations to their votes.¹¹ While some later studies confirmed this unflattering image of the electorate,¹² others discovered the impact of issues on electoral choices and outcomes.¹³

Aside from debates about the extent of issue voting, the literature commonly implies that at the individual level, it is information-oriented and motivated voting behavior. Issue voting presumes voters who are informed and concerned about policy issues, qualities that should be used as the main basis for candidate choice. Researchers have examined the role of news media in issue voting from two different approaches: the agenda-setting tradition and a more generalist perspective documenting the influence of news media on the elements of issue voting. Agenda-setting research has shown that voters perceive issues emphasized in the news media to be more important,¹⁴ and prioritize those issues for candidate evaluations¹⁵ and voting decisions.¹⁶ On the other hand, the generalist approach has focused on the overall contribution of news use, regardless of issue salience, to issue knowledge,¹⁷ issue-importance perception,¹⁸ and issue voting.¹⁹

The current research synthesizes the two theoretical approaches to the role of news media in the process. Following the common conceptualization from issue-voting literature, we regard issue voting as involving the consecutive process of attainment of issue knowledge and perception of issue importance. Then, issue knowledge and importance should guide voters' evaluations about the agreement between their own and candidates' issue positions, which ultimately influences vote choice. Research on the consequences of agenda setting²⁰ provides a theoretical framework delineating the potential role of news media in the issue-voting process: news attention consecutively leads to cognitive (issue knowledge and issue importance), attitudinal (issue proximity), and behavioral consequences (vote choice). Unlike agenda setting, which focuses on the ordering of issue salience and its subsequent effects, however, we take a generalist approach that addresses overall contribution of news use to the fulfillment of basic cognitive and attitudinal preconditions leading to candidate choice.

News Use and Issue Importance

The issue-voting process presumes that a voter cares about policy issues and has the motivation to use policy alternatives as standards for an electoral choice. Issue importance, as an amount of concern given to policy issues, can be considered as an essential attitudinal element in initiating issue voting. Importance attitude, in general, has been documented as guiding information processing regarding the attitude object and affecting subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Importance perception inspires people to gather and use attitude-relevant information to make decisions and take actions.²¹ Due to this activating function of importance, it is often emphasized as a motivator in the attitude-behavior connection. When people assign importance to an attitude object, they are "motivated to protect it, express it, and be faithful to it in action."²²

Sources of importance attitudes can be both individual and social, as well as long-standing and temporal. Although personal values, interests, and group identification have enduring influence on people's importance attitudes, a drastic increase in issue salience, caused by an influx of new information, can alter the extent of citizen concerns about specific issues.²³ News media, as a main channel of electoral information, can heighten the level of issue importance in a relatively short time period. Exposure to news not only structures the ordering of importance given to different issues,²⁴ but also simultaneously increases the overall salience of multiple issues.²⁵ Drawing on past research linking news use and issue importance, our first hypothesis posits the following:

H1: News attention will be positively related to issue importance.

News Use and Issue Knowledge

Aside from voters' issue concerns, the issue-voting process requires individual cognitive skill to recognize and compare different candidates' issue positions. During electoral campaigns, the news media are expected to provide substantive information regarding candidates' policy positions.²⁶ Although studies have found the relationship between news use and acquisition of issue knowledge to be somewhat mixed, an individual's news use tended to be related to the level of issue knowledge when it was measured on the left-right scale in which survey respondents were asked to place candidates' relative issue positions, rather than when they were directly asked to answer candidates' issue stands.²⁷

This observation implies that news use is likely to contribute to voter approximation of candidate stances on various policy issues, even if voters may have difficulty articulating those exact stands. At the very least, the electorate may learn from the news media a minimum level of issue knowledge necessary for issue voting, enabling voters to place candidates' issue positions correctly in relative left-right terms. Therefore, we predict that news use should contribute to voter issue knowledge.

H2: News attention will be positively related to issue knowledge.

News Use and Issue Voting

The next condition for issue voting is that the electorate should be able to assess which candidates' issue positions more closely match their own. The spatial theory of voting demonstrates how voter-candidate agreement about issue positions affects issue-voting behavior. Because voters perceive greater utility from a candidate whose policy positions are nearest to their own, they are more likely to vote for that candidate.²⁸ In the issue-voting literature, the concept of issue proximity taps into the extent of voter-candidate agreement on policy stands. Issue proximity captures whether voters are on the same side of an issue position and to what extent they agree or disagree with different candidates' policy stands.²⁹

Voter assessment of issue proximity should involve voters' motivation and skills in placing their own issue orientations against competing candidates' stances for comparison. The importance an individual ascribes to policy issues can serve as the main motivator to engage in this cognitive effort. Issue importance inspires people to seek out and elaborate on issue-relevant information necessary for issue-based electoral choices. People tend to use important issues as criteria for candidate evaluation because these issues are cognitively more accessible.³⁰ Voters are also more likely to detect greater differences in candidates' issue positions when they perceive certain issues to be important. Issue importance, therefore, can either mediate or moderate issue voting.³¹ Because issue importance helps voters discern differences in candidates' policy positions, we expect that it should have a positive relationship with issue proximity that reflects voters' evaluation of the degree of agreement and disagreement between their policy preferences and different candidates' policy alternatives. Therefore, our next hypothesis is as follows:

H3: Issue importance will be positively related to issue proximity.

Even if voters obtain issue-relevant information, they still should be able to process that information to translate it into issue voting. When voters lack knowledge about candidates' stands, they are unable to assess rationally which candidate's policy platforms correspond more closely with their own. Previous studies have observed that cognitive ability, such as level of political knowledge and expertise, is one of the pre-conditions for issue voting. Researchers have shown that those informed about politics in general,³² and knowledgeable about candidates' specific policy positions,³³ tend to rely more on issues to determine how to vote.

The relationship between issue knowledge and issue proximity is a crucial test to validate the premise that issue voting is driven by individual evaluation of policy options. Perception of close issue proximity itself can happen without any consideration of candidates' objective policy positions. Voters might decide that one candidate's issue positions more closely correspond to their own simply because they prefer that candidate over other candidates. If issue voting is a rational decision made on the basis of information, as normative theory assumes, it should be correlated with issue knowledge. Therefore, our next hypothesis is as follows:

H4: Issue knowledge will be positively related to issue proximity.

Although previous research has explored the impact of news use on issue importance and issue knowledge, few studies have extended their findings to voter assessment of the match between their policy preferences and candidate positions. It is necessary to include that weighing process of voter-candidate issue agreement, because it constitutes a key aspect of meaningful issue voting. We suppose that news media, as a major source of campaign-related information, can exert a significant influence on people's evaluations of issue proximity.

As a concept linking voter–candidate issue positions, issue proximity entails the intensity or strength of voters’ opinions regarding the degree of closeness between their own preferences and the positions of competing candidates.³⁴ Because attention to information tends to strengthen attitudes and evaluations,³⁵ we predict that news attention would lead to greater intensity of issue proximity. Voters will feel greater closeness to one candidate’s issue positions, while perceiving greater distance to the other candidate’s positions from their own preferences.

H5: News attention will be positively related to issue proximity.

Finally, we raised one research question regarding the interaction of news use and partisanship on issue voting. Because issue voting assumes independent and rational voting decisions by voters, rather than habitual choice based on party or group affinity, it is often highly regarded. In this respect, declining partisanship in Western democracies has raised the expectation of an upsurge in issue voting. Because a significant portion of the public disassociates itself from party loyalty, the room for issue impact on voting choice increases accordingly. Also, greater availability and diversity of news media in contemporary campaigns facilitate issue voting by providing information necessary for voting choice, based on the merits of policy alternatives instead of partisan affiliation.³⁶ Although recent studies provide evidence of greater partisan polarization, at least in U.S. politics,³⁷ the basic thesis may hold true that an issue voter is politically unaffiliated and media-reliant. If issue voting indeed represents an individual voter’s autonomous, information-oriented choice, news media should have greater impact on political independents who are unconstrained by party affinity.

RQ1: Does issue proximity have a stronger relationship with vote choice among political independents who are more attentive to news than others?

Method

Data

The 2008 ANES was employed for data analysis. All questions in the analysis, except attention to the Internet for campaign information and vote choice, were obtained from the pre-election wave. Using split samples, ANES had two different versions of questionnaires named *old* and *new*, and each version included six policy issues designed to gauge respondents’ issue perceptions and attitudes. While three issues (i.e., government spending and services, defense spending, and assistance to blacks) were commonly included in both questionnaires, three different issues were asked in the two versions. In addition to the three common issues, the old version had three other issue items: medical insurance, job guarantee, and environment/job tradeoff. The new version included questions regarding universal health coverage, illegal immigrants’ citizenship process, and lower emission standards. For each issue, ANES asked four issue-related questions: respondents’ perception of issue importance, issue preferences, and perceptions of Barack Obama’s and John McCain’s issue positions.

Measures

Issue importance. Respondents' perceptions of issue importance were measured by the question, "How important is this issue to you personally?" on a five-point scale ranging from "not important at all" (1) to "extremely important" (5). Responses to the six questions were added to create a composite index ($\alpha = .72$). Inter-item reliability of issue importance was lower than the ideal level, which may be attributed to the presence of the issue publics who attend to a single or only a few issues instead of considering a broad range of issues. Issue publics would give high importance to certain issues of interest to them, whereas they would assign low importance to the remaining issues. This tendency is expected to function as a reduction of overall inter-item reliability for issue importance.

Issue knowledge. Respondents' issue knowledge was measured by the relatively correct placement of the two presidential candidates' issue positions using questions on a seven-point scale. For example, when a respondent placed Obama's position on service spending closer to "government should provide more services" than McCain's on the scale, the response was counted as a correct answer (1 = *correct*, 0 = *incorrect*). A six-item index, ranging from 0 to 6 points, was constructed by combining answers to the six issues ($\alpha = .66$). Inter-item reliability of issue knowledge was marginal. In general, measures of political knowledge tend to have relatively low inter-item reliability because of measurement errors arising from guessing effects and variation in difficulty level among different items. First, some uninformed respondents may correctly answer knowledge questions by chance. The measurement error due to the guessing becomes more acute when knowledge questions employ multiple-choice items rather than open-ended items. Second, a battery of knowledge questions generally includes items having different levels of difficulty. Hard questions are useful to discriminate respondents' knowledge levels, but they lessen overall reliability.³⁸ As a specific domain of political knowledge, our issue-knowledge items should share the same general problems inherent in knowledge-related measurement, which might have caused marginal inter-item reliability.

Issue proximity. To measure respondents' perceptions of the closeness between their own issue preferences and the two candidates' positions, we used a scale developed in previous studies.³⁹ In addition to questions about issue placement of the candidates, ANES also asked respondents to situate themselves on the same seven-point scale. The triangular relationships of the three questions determining respondents' own issue preferences and perceptions of the two candidates' issue positions generated the distances for computation.

First, for each issue, the distance between a respondent's own preference and the perception of McCain's issue positions was calculated. Distance between the respondent's and Obama's position was also computed using the same method. Second, the absolute distance from McCain was subtracted from the absolute distance from Obama. Each value implied strength as well as direction. For example, if a respondent

put himself or herself at 2, McCain at 3, and Obama at 7 on the defense-spending issue scale, the proximity score for the issue was 4. Because a longer distance indicates a higher level of disagreement, a positive sign after subtraction means that the respondent concurred more with McCain than Obama. Conversely, a negative sign indicates that the respondent is closer to Obama than McCain in terms of issue proximity. Zero means the respondent does not see any difference between the two candidates' issue stances. The possible range of each issue score was -6 to 6 . Final issue-proximity scores were an index adding the proximity scores of the six issues ($\alpha = .78$).

News attention. Attention to TV, newspaper, and the Internet was measured by questions determining respondents' attention to campaign news or information from each source. Respondents answered on a five-point scale from "none" (1) to "a great deal" (5).

Vote choice. In postelection interviews, respondents indicated whom they voted for. Vote choice was dummy coded (McCain = 1, Obama = 0).

Control variables. Four demographic variables were added for control: gender (female = 57%), age ($M = 47.32$ years old, $SD = 17.16$), education ($M = 13.13$ years, $SD = 2.57$), and income (median = \$30,000-\$34,999). These variables have been found to influence political participation⁴⁰ and news use.⁴¹ Education, especially, is a strong predictor of news attention as well as issue knowledge.⁴² Two political variables were also included: partisanship and campaign interest. Partisanship has been found to influence political attitudes and behaviors, including voting.⁴³ Party identification was separated into Democrat (42.1%), Republican (18.9%), and Independent (37.5%). Campaign interest was controlled because greater interest in the presidential campaign would encourage people to pay more attention to news, which could affect the subsequent issue-voting process. Campaign interest was a single-item question asking how much a respondent was interested in the campaign.

Analytic Procedures

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships among news attention, issue importance, issue knowledge, and issue proximity. For the analysis, respondents' original issue-proximity scores (-6 to $+6$) were transformed into absolute values (0 to 6) because the related hypotheses concern the strength of issue proximity, not the direction of favorability toward either Obama or McCain. Vote choice was not included because the variable involved the direction of respondents' selection of one candidate over the other. We cannot expect, for example, that greater news attention or issue knowledge would predict voting for either Obama or McCain. For the research question on vote choice, hierarchical logistic regression was conducted. We entered the original measurement of issue proximity, including the direction of favorability toward either one of the candidates, as a main predictor of vote choice. Demographic variables, partisanship, and campaign interest were controlled in all analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Issue-Related Variables.

	Importance	Knowledge	Proximity
	<i>M</i>	Percentage of correct answers	<i>M</i> of absolute value
Spending and services	3.66	61.1	1.70
Defense spending	3.54	63.6	1.58
Government medical insurance	4.03	61.3	1.88
Universal health coverage	3.73	62.8	2.20
Job guarantee	3.72	61.7	1.65
Illegal immigrants' citizenship	3.20	40.7	1.15
Assistance to blacks	3.22	38.9	1.34
Environment vs. jobs	3.41	39.1	1.00
Lower emission standards	3.29	15.8	0.98

Results

Preliminary aggregate-level analysis showed that issue importance, issue knowledge, and issue proximity were associated with each other. Rank-order correlation indicated significant relationships between importance and knowledge ($\rho = .67, p < .05$), importance and proximity ($\rho = .83, p < .01$), and knowledge and proximity ($\rho = .73, p < .05$).⁴⁴ The levels of respondents' issue knowledge, perceptions of issue importance, and proximity varied among the six issue items (see Table 1).

Figure 1 presents the results of SEM analysis controlling for six exogenous variables. There was one latent variable, news attention to traditional media, comprised of two indicators—newspaper and TV news attention. The model $\chi^2 (60.35, df = 22)$ was significant at the .001 level, yet other statistics presented good fits: the goodness of fit index (GFI) of 1.00, the comparative fit index (CFI) of .99, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .03, and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .02. The indices met one of the criteria of $RMSEA < .06$ and $SRMR < .10$.⁴⁵ The normed chi-square, value of χ^2 divided by degrees of freedom, of the model was 2.74, and it also indicated the model was acceptable.⁴⁶ Squared multiple correlation of issue proximity was .46, indicating 46% of variance of the variable was explained in the model. Among eight direct paths that included main variables of news attention, issue importance, issue knowledge, and issue proximity, six were statistically significant at the .001 level.

H1 predicted that news attention would be positively related to issue importance. While attention to traditional media was a significant predictor of issue importance, attention to campaign information on the Internet was not. The standardized coefficient of the path from traditional media and the Internet to issue importance was .23

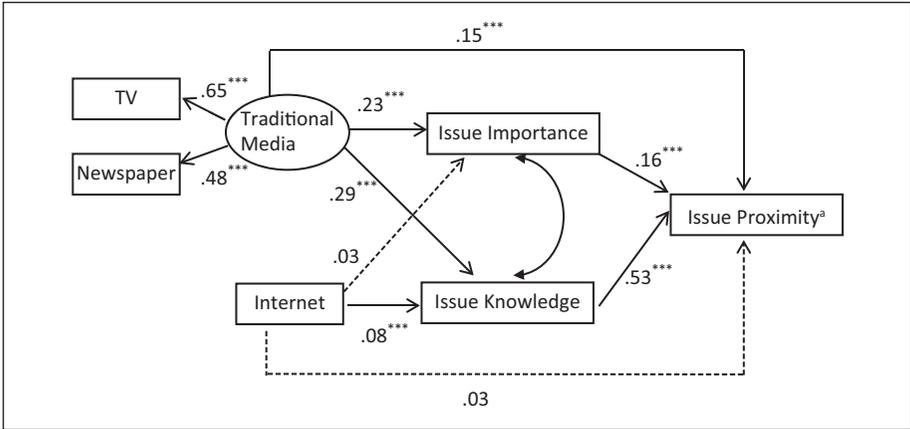


Figure 1. Result of hypothesized model.

Note. Model Fit: $\chi^2 (22) = 60.35, p < .001, GFI = 1.00, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .02$. Solid lines indicate statistical significance of direct effects. Exogenous variables (*gender, age, education, income, partisanship, and campaign interest*) were entered as covariates. GFI = goodness of fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

^aAbsolute value of issue proximity. Standardized coefficients, $***p < .001$.

($p < .001$) and $.03$ ($p = .15$), respectively. **H1** was partially supported. **H2** posited that news attention would be positively related to issue knowledge. As expected, all media variables were significant: direct effects of attention to traditional media ($.29$) and the Internet ($.08$) on issue knowledge were both statistically significant at the $.001$ level. Paying greater attention to news media contributed to greater knowledge about policy issues. **H2** was supported.

The next hypotheses concerned predictors of issue proximity. First, direct effects of both issue importance ($.16, p < .001$) and issue knowledge ($.53, p < .001$) on issue proximity were positive and significant. Therefore, **H3** and **H4** were confirmed. **H5**, predicting the relationship between news attention and issue proximity, yielded mixed results. Attention to traditional news ($.15, p < .001$) directly affected increase in issue proximity. The path from attention to the Internet news to issue proximity was not significant ($.03, p = .15$). Effects of decomposition, however, demonstrated that both traditional media and the Internet news attention exerted significant indirect effects on issue proximity through issue importance and issue knowledge. Indirect effects of attention on traditional media ($.19$) and the Internet ($.05$) on issue proximity were significant at the $.001$ level (see Table 2).

Finally, we asked one research question about whether issue proximity had a stronger association with voting decisions among political independents who pay closer attention to news than others. To compare the effect sizes of issue proximity on vote choice depending on party identification and levels of news media attention,

Table 2. Effects Decomposition of Main Variables.

Causal variables	Effects	Endogenous variables		
		Issue importance	Issue knowledge	Issue proximity
Traditional media	Direct	.23***	.29***	.15***
	Indirect			.19***
	Total	.23***	.29***	.34***
Internet	Direct	.03	.08***	.03
	Indirect			.05***
	Total	.03	.08***	.07***
Issue importance	Direct			.16***
	Indirect			
	Total			.16***
Issue knowledge	Direct			.53***
	Indirect			
	Total			.53***

Note. Bootstrapping was used to test significance of the standardized coefficients.
 *** $p < .001$.

respondents were first classified into three groups of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Those groups were divided again into high/low attention groups, using the median value of media attention as a cutoff point. As a result, a total of eighteen groups (three party identifications \times two levels of attention \times three media types) were created. Each hierarchical logistic regression analysis had two blocks: control block (age, gender, education, income, campaign interest, issue importance, and issue knowledge) and issue proximity. Because the research question focused on issue proximity, Table 3 presents the statistical values related only to issue proximity.

As Table 3 shows, issue proximity was a significant predictor of vote choice at least at the .01 level in all eighteen analyses, regardless of party identification or news-attention levels. The first noteworthy point in the results is that the Independent group showed stronger association between issue proximity and vote choice than the Democrats and Republicans across different media types and attention levels. In the case of low-TV news-attention groups, for example, the Wald statistic of the Independent group ($W = 22.67, p < .001$) was much higher than for the Democratic ($W = 8.27, p < .01$) or Republican groups ($W = 6.58, p < .01$). In sum, voters who did not express identified partisanship relied more on issue proximity in choosing their next president.

Comparisons between high and low news-attention groups yielded another notable finding. There were higher positive associations between issue proximity and vote choice among high news-attention groups than among low-attention groups in general. That is, issue proximity worked as a relatively stronger predictor in the high news-attention groups than in the low-attention groups, regardless of respondents'

Table 3. Issue Proximity as a Predictor of Vote Choice Depending on News-Attention Levels and Partisanship.

	Low attention to news			High attention to news		
	Wald ^a	Exp (B)	R ² (Nagelkerke's) change ^b	Wald	Exp (B)	R ² (Nagelkerke's) change
Democrat						
TV	8.27**	1.19	.14	24.07***	1.2	.18
Newspaper	14.42***	1.20	.15	19.16***	1.19	.18
Internet	14.16***	1.18	.13	15.84***	1.18	.17
Independent						
TV	22.67***	1.29	.38	61.98***	1.33	.51
Newspaper	36.23***	1.29	.43	45.78***	1.35	.51
Internet	31.12***	1.30	.35	48.29***	1.35	.59
Republican						
TV	6.58**	1.56	.39	19.61***	1.35	.30
Newspaper	9.86**	2.19	.48	10.65**	1.21	.19
Internet	11.35**	1.30	.26	14.86***	1.51	.38

Note. Bold letters indicate higher values in comparisons of issue-proximity scores between low- and high-attention groups. Hierarchical logistic regression analyses, vote choice: 0 = Obama, 1 = McCain.

^aTest of statistical significance of the issue-proximity coefficient in the model.

^bAmount of variance explained by issue proximity in addition to amount by age, gender, education, income, campaign interest, issue importance, and issue knowledge.

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

partisanship. More importantly, the analyses also demonstrated differences in interaction between partisanship and levels of news attention: compared with partisan groups, the Independents had a consistently stronger relationship between issue proximity and vote choice among the high-attention group than the low-attention group, regardless of media type. To highlight this comparison, Table 3 marked a higher value of statistics between low- and high-attention groups by different partisanship groups, as shown in the bold numbers. These findings indicated that news attention had a stronger relationship with vote choice among nonpartisan voters through issue proximity. When respondents lacked partisan loyalties, either Democratic or Republican, they relied more on issues to determine for whom to vote. More importantly, the association between issue proximity and vote choice was stronger among those independents who paid greater attention to campaign news and information than did other groups.

Discussion

This study illustrates that an individual's news use plays an important role in the issue-voting process. Following the traditional view of issue voting, we propose that issue voters should have issue concerns, issue knowledge, and comparisons of their own

issue preferences against competing candidates' policy stances, which consequently should lead them to vote for a candidate whose issue positions agree more closely with their own.

SEM analysis demonstrates that attention to traditional news media, consisting of newspaper and TV, relates to these necessary conditions for issue voting. Those who pay greater attention to traditional news media tend to assign higher importance to policy issues and to have higher levels of issue knowledge. News attention also helps individuals perceive they are closer to one candidate in terms of issue positions, while they feel more distant from the other candidate. Simply, news attention contributes to voters' differentiation of alternative policy positions, as espoused by the two different presidential candidates.

Attention to campaign information on the Internet, however, had a much weaker association with the issue-voting process. While contributing to issue knowledge, attention to online information did not increase issue importance and proximity directly. Instead, attention to online information worked on issue proximity through issue importance and knowledge. This relatively weak association may result from a single-item measure, which would encompass attention to many different types of information sources, such as traditional news media websites, candidate websites, and even citizen-generated content.

Another interpretation is that the Internet might be less effective than traditional news media in facilitating the electorate to engage in issue voting based on the consideration of a broad range of issues. Because the Internet allows greater individual selection of information, some people focus on issues of interest and bypass others they may come across when consuming traditional news media. The nonlinear style of information presentation on the websites makes it easier for the audience to avoid certain topics and issues, compared with the linear structure of traditional news media guiding the audience through spatial and time ordering of content.⁴⁷ User selectivity and the organizing structure of information on the web may then enhance concerns and knowledge about issues of personal interest, but they may decrease the opportunity for people to encounter, learn, and form opinions about diverse issues.

Another important finding of the current study is the different relationships between news and political information use and issue proximity among political independents and partisans. When respondents were divided into separate groups according to their news-attention levels and party identification, the relationship between proximity and voting choice was stronger among political independents highly attentive to news and campaign information. The results seem to suggest that news use, as a source of issue-relevant information, has greater association with issue voting for independents.

Overall, this study makes a unique contribution to research on the role of news media in issue voting. Previous studies typically failed to consider fully whether news use guides issue voting as a multiplicative process and how news use relates to voters' evaluations of agreements between their own policy preferences and candidates' stances. As an important exception, Kim and colleagues' study demonstrated that news use relates to some key elements of issue voting: issue opinionation, issue knowledge, and issue consideration for candidate evaluation.⁴⁸ Their operationalization of issue

voting, as being the number of issues mentioned for candidate evaluation, however, does not adequately address whether voters' assessments of issue congruence affect their vote choices, a question regarded as an essential element of issue voting.⁴⁹ As one of the first studies exploring the association between news use and assessment of issue agreement, the current research documents the idea that news use not only enhances general issue consideration for candidate evaluation, but also facilitates evaluation of issue congruence, which ultimately converts to candidate choice.

Also, this study contributes to the area of issue-voting research by examining how partisanship interacts with news use. Issue voting has been considered as a function of erosion of partisanship and growing availability of campaign information via news media.⁵⁰ This observation suggests issue voting would be more common among political independents who greatly rely on news media for campaign information. Our study provides rare empirical evidence supportive of this argument.

The current research has specific implications for journalists, candidates, and campaign professionals. The significant role of news media for issue voting found in this study encourages journalists and news organizations to devote coverage to substantive issues, rather than candidates' personal characteristics and horserace coverage. In doing so, journalists will fulfill their vital roles of helping the public make rational, informed decisions in elections, as well as mitigating public cynicism and distrust toward the news media and politics.⁵¹ Our study also reminds candidates that emphasizing their policy stands can be the most effective strategy to earn votes from political independents. When targeting independents, candidates may consider tailoring their campaign messages to differentiate their issue positions from those of their competitors.

Limitations of the current study concern an assumed causal direction between issue proximity and vote choice. Although we found that voters tend to choose a candidate whose issue positions are closer to their own, it does not necessarily mean that voters' evaluations about issue positions determine their vote choices. Instead, people may rationalize their issue preferences after deciding for whom they will vote.

The direction of influence from news use to issue-related variables presumed in this study raises similar causality concerns. Following prior research, we viewed news attention as an antecedent or predictor of issue importance, knowledge, and proximity. In fact, studies using panel data found that news use precedes issue-specific knowledge,⁵² as well as general political knowledge.⁵³ Also, many analyses in the agenda-setting tradition have documented effects of news use on perception of issue importance based on both experimental⁵⁴ and longitudinal data.⁵⁵ Even though these prior investigations provide theoretical rationales for the causal inference made in this study, the causality issue has yet to be addressed fully. We admit that reverse causation is possible in the direction of effects running from issue importance, knowledge, and proximity to news use. People who assign greater importance to issues and have greater issue knowledge may be more likely to consume news media to seek further information about the issues and reinforce their issue attitudes. The cross-sectional data we employed, therefore, do not allow us to draw a firm conclusion that news attention leads to the issue-voting process.

Another drawback relates to the measurement of concepts included in this study.

Due to the inherent limitations of secondary data, some of the measurements used in this study were less than ideal to tap the concepts of our interest. First, single-item measures of news attention raise concerns about reliability, as well as validity. Compared with multi-item scales, single-item scales tend to be more prone to measurement error, and at the same time may not fully capture the complexity of a construct. Communication scholars have debated what constitutes the valid measurement of news use to grasp its full influence on political cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors. Some researchers note the relatively weak predictive power of self-reported measures of news use for actual news reception, which makes regarding news attention as a meaningful predictor of the political effects of news a questionable practice.⁵⁶ Other investigators identified distinct effects of different dimensions of news use, such as exposure to specific content, reliance, and gratification seeking.⁵⁷

Our news-attention measurements, based on single items, neither tap fully into attention to specific news content nor consider other dimensions of news use that could relate to the issue-voting process. Especially, considering the fragmented and diversified news environment of recent election campaigns, questions asking about respondents' general news use may not properly tap into their habits. Attention to different news outlets and programs may highlight distinctive influences on the issue-voting process.

Second, the Internet attention measure obtained from the post-wave survey raises concerns about the causal inference assumed in this study. The retrospective nature of the question regarding Internet attention reduces the validity worry because the question inquired about respondents' past attention during the campaign rather than present attention after the election. It should be noted, however, that retrospective questions tend to undermine reliability of measurement. Respondents' memory decay and extra effort to recall past behaviors might have led to underreporting or overreporting of their actual Internet attention.

We expect future research would continue to elaborate on the role of news media in the issue-voting process. In our study, we looked at people's overall levels of news attention, knowledge, and perceptions about political issues. Not all issues will be equally considered when individuals make their voting decisions, though. Issue publics, for example, should give more consideration to certain issues over others. They may employ news media and sources differently to satisfy their parochial information goals, which could be hard to achieve from traditional news media that cater to a general audience. Also, issue voting may not necessarily represent vote choice based on the electorates' *rational* calculations of candidates' competing issue stances. Some issue voters may choose a candidate whose issue positions apparently contradict their own personal or group interests.⁵⁸ We propose that subsequent studies should consider how diverse groups deploy different news outlets and content to engage in potentially different types of issue voting.

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