Which Matters Most? Comparing the Impact of Issues and the Economy in American, British and Canadian Elections

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The objective of this study is to assess and compare the relative impact of issues and the economy on the vote in democratic elections. There is a rich and vast literature dealing with issue voting and an equally impressive literature concerning economic voting. For the most part, however, these amount to two separate streams of research. Relatively little attention has been paid to where these literatures overlap and less still to the simple but basic question: which matters most, the issues or the economy?

The main debate in the issue voting literature recently has been between the directional and proximity models.[1] That debate, engaging both technical and conceptual issues, has focused entirely on *how* issues play in an election, whether voters prefer the party that is closest to their own position or the party that is the strongest defender of their side on an issue. The question of *how much* issues affect the vote, however, has been neglected. Indeed, both the proximity and directional schools implicitly agree that issues matter, and so challenge the Michigan school's strong scepticism on the import of issues.[2] Given that the difference between the two models is often quite small,[3] a more fruitful line of investigation might be to return to the equally fundamental 'how much' question.

The economic voting literature is even more voluminous than the issue voting one. Here there are many different debates. One is about the merits and limits of aggregate versus individual-level measures,[4] a second is whether voters are prospective or retrospective,[5] a third is about whether they

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[1] See, most recently, Anders Westholm, 'On the Return of Epicycles: Some Crossroads in Spatial Modeling Revisited', *Journal of Politics*, 63 (2001), 436–81; Stuart Elaine Macdonald, George Rabinowitz and Ola Listhaug, 'Sophistry versus Science: On Further Efforts to Rehabilitate the Proximity Model', *Journal of Politics*, 63 (2001), 482–500.

[2] The authors of the *American Voter* argued that 'many voters fail to appreciate that an issue exists, others are insufficiently involved to pay attention to recognized issues, and still others fail to make connections between issue positions and party policy.' See Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 183.

[3] The fact is that for the great majority of respondents the two models make identical predictions about which party will be preferred. For instance, Blais *et al.* find more support for the proximity model, and report that each model separately explains the same proportion of variance. See André Blais, Richard Nadeau, Elisabeth Gidengil and Neil Nevitte, 'The Formation of Party Preferences: Testing the Proximity and Directional Models', *European Journal of Political Research*, 40 (2001), 81–91.

[4] Gerald H. Kramer, 'The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate vs Individual-Level Findings on Economics and Elections, and Sociotropic Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 65 (1983), 131–43; Raymond Duch, Harvey D. Palmer and Christopher J. Anderson, 'Heterogeneity in Perceptions of National Economic Conditions', *American Journal of Political Science*, 44 (2000), 635–52.

[5] Michael B. MacKuen, Robert S. Erikson and James A. Stimson, 'Peasants or Bankers? The American Electorate and the American Economy', *American Political Science Review*, 86 (1992), 597–611; Helmut Norporth, chapter entitled 'The Economy', in his *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996); Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen and James A. Stimson, 'Bankers or Peasants Revisited: Economic Expectations and Presidential Approval', *Electoral Studies*, 19 (2000), 295–312.

are sociotropic or egocentric.[6] Again, in all these studies the question of how much impact the economy has on the vote is not really addressed.

Our objective is to construct an empirical encounter between these two alternative interpretations of vote choice. We take for granted that there is a generalized tendency to reward (punish) the incumbent party for good (bad) economic times and a generalized tendency to vote for the party that best defends one's position on the major issues of the day. But we ask: do issues matter more, less or about the same as the economy?

The answer to that basic question is not at all obvious. On the one hand, it is plausible that voters might attach greater weight to issues than to the economy because the incumbent party can be held more directly responsible for its handling of the issues than for the performance of the economy. While governments clearly do decide public policies on fiscal or social issues, the economic performance of a country, by contrast, hinges on many factors other than government decisions, including the state of the international economy over which governments have little control. Consequently, voters pay greater attention to issues, for which parties and governments can be held directly responsible, than to the economy, for which their responsibility is more tenuous.

On the other hand, it is also plausible that voters care first and foremost about performance, not about policies: they 'are not terribly concerned about whether the government fights unemployment via public-works projects, tax rebates, or business tax credits. Whatever succeeds.'[7] Because it is easier to determine whether the economy is in good or bad shape than to ascertain party positions on the major issues of the day, the state of the economy may well be a more useful and reliable shortcut.

Both lines of argument seem equally reasonable. Our objective is to look at the empirical evidence to determine to which of these two dimensions voters pay more attention.

We wish to compare the relative impact of the issues and the economy at the *individual* and at the *aggregate* level. At the individual level, we wish to determine how many voters would have voted differently if the issues or the economy had had no effect on their vote choice. At the aggregate level, we wish to estimate how different the outcome of the election would have been if the issues or the economy had played no role.

The most important contributions to our contemporary understanding of the relative importance of issues and the economy on vote choice have been supplied by Alvarez and Nagler, who propose a model of multiparty elections that combines voters' economic evaluations and issue positions.[8]

Our study is inspired by the work of Alvarez, Nagler and their colleagues. We address a similar question: the relative impact of the issues and the economy. Our perspective is, however, slightly different. While Alvarez and Nagler are mostly interested in explaining overall vote *shift* from one election to the next, our aim is to assess how much of the vote, *at a given election*, can be explained by the economy and the issues. And, as already indicated, we wish to ascertain the impact of the economy and the issues at both the individual and aggregate level, while Alvarez and Nagler focus on the latter.

[6] Norporth, 'The Economy'; Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Martin Paldam, 'Economic Voting: An Introduction', *Electoral Studies*, 19 (2000), 113–21.

[7] Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 5; see also Samuel Popkin, John W. Gorman, Charles Phillips and Jeffrey A. Smith, 'Comment: What Have You Done for Me Lately? Towards an Investment Theory of Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 70 (1976), 779–805.

[8] Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, 'Economics, Issues and the Perot Candidacy: Voter Choice in the 1992 Presidential Election', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 714–44; Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, 'When Politics and Models Collide: Estimating Models of Multicandidate Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 55–96; Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, 'Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues: Voter Choice in the 1996 Presidential Election', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 1349–63; Michael R. Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and Shaun Bowler, 'Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty Elections', *American Political Science Review*, 94 (2000), 131–49; Michael R. Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and J. R. Willette, 'Measuring the Relative Impact of Issues and the Economy in Democratic Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 19 (2000), 237–53.

THE STUDY

Alvarez, Nagler and colleagues (hereafter Alvarez *et al.*) have examined two elections in the United States (1992 and 1996), two in Canada (1988 and 1993) and one in Britain (1987). We consider all (with one exception to be explained below) elections held in these three countries since 1985, a total of eleven elections. This larger set of cases should be helpful in determining whether there is a generalized pattern for the economy to dominate the issues or the reverse.

Because our general question is similar, we generally follow the approach developed by Alvarez *et al.*, except where there are persuasive reasons for doing otherwise. We have made a number of modifications, however, partly because our research questions are somewhat different.

Like Alvarez *et al.*, we estimate a multinomial probit model of vote choice for multiparty elections. Alvarez and Nagler have shown that multinomial probit is a more appropriate model for the study of multiparty elections because it allows to relax the constraining 'irrelevance of independent alternatives hypothesis.'[9] The standard model they have used is one that includes distance variables between respondents' and parties' issue positions (as proxied by mean placement by all respondents in order to reduce projection effects), economic perceptions, party identification and socio-demographic characteristics, and this is also our model.

Like Alvarez *et al.*, we use distance variables for issues.[10] Alvarez *et al.* implicitly subscribe to the proximity model of voting, and so do we. This seems to us the most logical choice, given that the jury is still out on the performance of the proximity and directional models and given that the latter is more theoretically elegant and parsimonious.[11] Furthermore, and most importantly, for the question at hand (the relative impact of issues versus the economy), the choice of model does not make much difference because the predictions of each converge in the great majority of cases.

For the analyses of economic perceptions in American and Canadian elections, we utilize respondents' retrospective and prospective evaluations of both their own personal financial situation and the national economy. Alvarez *et al.* included only retrospective evaluations, but we also include prospective evaluations, which has been shown to matter to the vote decision.[12] This approach means that we are incorporating a greater number of economic variables than Alvarez *et al.*.

These four economic variables are also included in our analyses of the British 1997 and 2001 elections. As it happens, not all of these variables were available for the 1992 and 1987 British elections. For the latter, Alvarez *et al.* used respondents' views about whether unemployment, inflation and taxes had increased or decreased during the government's mandate. We retain the first two items but drop views about taxes on the grounds that taxes constitute a public policy and not an economic indicator strictly understood.[13] For the 1992 British election, we incorporated a different set of variables that approximate retrospective evaluations of personal finances and of the national economy. The two selected variables capture respondents' perceptions about the increase or decrease in their own standard of living (personal finances) and in the general standard of living (national economy) since the last general election.[14] No prospective economic perceptions were available for the 1987 and 1992 British elections.

Our model includes party identification, as Alvarez *et al.* did for their analyses of American

[9] Alvarez and Nagler, 'When Politics and Models Collide'. We use a simple binary logit model for the two American elections with only two parties.

[10] For American elections, but not for British and Canadian elections, Alvarez *et al.* included opinions on issues such as abortion as well as distance between respondents' and parties' positions. To be consistent and to maximize cross-national comparability, we systematically use distance variables.

[11] J. B. Lewis and G. King, 'No Evidence on Directional vs. Proximity Voting', *Political* Analysis, 8 (2000), 21–33. They demonstrate that the debate hinges on key assumptions which cannot be tested with existing methods and data.

[12] MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson, 'Peasants or Bankers?'.

[13] Taxes are set up by governments. Unemployment and inflation are not directly decided by governments even though they may be strongly affected by measures such as monetary policy. Note that views about taxes did not have an independent effect on vote choice in the 1987 British election. See Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler, 'Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty Elections'.

[14] Information on these two variables were not available in the 1987 British Election Study.

elections. Alvarez *et al.*, however, did *not* incorporate party identification in their study of British and Canadian elections. We do. While some have argued that party identification is a uniquely American concept that cannot be exported abroad,[15] more recent research questions that judgement;[16] there is every reason to believe that many voters in Canada and Britain, as in the United States, have long-term party attachments.

The inclusion of party identification introduces a measurement issue.[17] The concern is that the standard party identification question could be just another indicator of party support.[18] In Canada as in Britain, the evidence is that those who say they think of themselves as partisans but add that they feel only weakly so do not really have long-term attachments.[19] The most prudent approach, in our view, is to consider as genuine identifiers only those who feel very or fairly strong partisans. Accordingly, our approach is to include party identification in the model for every election, as do Alvarez *et al.* for American elections, but to use a measure of party identification that includes only 'strong' and 'moderate' identifiers.

Nonetheless, because the status of party identification remains controversial, especially outside the United States, we estimated our model both with and without party identification. Because the substantive conclusions are exactly the same, we present below only the findings when party identification is included.

In addition to issue, economic and party identification variables, the model includes a set of relevant socio-demographic variables for each country. For multinomial probit estimations, issue variables and party identification enter the model as choice-specific variables while all the others enter as individual-specific ones. Issue variables and party identification are considered as choice-specific variables because their values vary with the choices. On the other hand, individual-specific variables such as socio-demographic ones are independent of the choices.[20]

Like Alvarez *et al.*, we employ simulations to estimate the relative effect of issues and the economy on the vote. Our approach is to estimate how different the propensity to vote for the various parties would have been if the issues or the economy had had no impact on the vote. We thus assess the impact of issues or the economy by comparing vote choice under a model in which issues or the economy affect vote choice (the full model) and under a scenario where their effect is set to be nil.

Our approach differs from that of Alvarez *et al.* For the economy, the simulations used by Alvarez *et al.* involve estimating how different vote shares would have been predicted if economic perceptions had been the same as in the previous or subsequent election. When ascertaining the impact of issues, Alvarez *et al.* compare the share of the vote the various parties are predicted to get on the basis of their model on the one hand and the share of the vote each party would get had it adopted an optimal position on the issues on the other.[21]

The methodology employed by Alvarez *et al.* for assessing the impact of the economy is perfectly appropriate if the objective is to account for vote *shift* from one election to the next. Our goal, however, is to estimate the effect of the economy at each given election. It is possible, for instance, for a party to benefit (or suffer) from the economy in two successive elections. In such a case, the

[15] Ian Budge, Ivor Crewe and Dennis Farlie, eds, *Party Identification and Beyond: Representations of Voting and Party Competition* (New York: Wiley, 1976).

[16] See, in particular, Eric Schickler and Donald P. Green, 'The Stability of Party Identification in Western Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 30 (1997), 450–83.

[17] André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, 'Measuring Party Identification: Britain, Canada, and the United States', *Political Behaviour*, 23 (2001), 5–22.

[18] Richard Rose and Ian McAllister, *The Loyalties of Voters: A Lifetime Learning Model* (London: Sage, 1990); James Adams and Samuel Merrill III, 'Modeling Party Strategies and Policy Representation in Multiparty Elections: Why Are Strategies So Extreme?' *American Journal of Political Science*, 43 (1999), 765–91.

[19] Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau and Nevitte, 'Measuring Party Identification'.

[20] For a thorough discussion of the specificities of multinomial choice models, see Alvarez and Nagler, 'When Politics and Models Collide'.

[21] The optimal position is the one that would yield the most votes for a party.

economy would be important in both elections but would not explain changes from one election to the next.

For the issues, Alvarez *et al.* employ a different methodology, in which the counterfactual corresponds to what would have been the optimal positions of the various parties. The problem is that there is asymmetry in the method deployed to assess the impact of the issues and the economy. In the latter case, the focus is on vote shift and the counterfactual is the previous election; in the former, it is the parties' estimated optimal positions. Because the counterfactual is not the same, the results of the simulations cannot be strictly compared.

Our approach logically flows from our goal, which is to estimate the relative impact of the issues and the economy at each election. And because the counterfactual is the same for both factors, a scenario under which either had no influence on vote choice, we are in a position to compare the two effects.

Finally, like Alvarez *et al.*, we assess the relative importance of issues and the economy by computing the difference in predicted vote shares under the full and counterfactual models. More precisely, we estimate which party each respondent is predicted to support (which party has the highest predicted probability), and the resulting vote shares for each party, under the full model on the one hand and under the counterfactual model, that is, setting the coefficient of the issues or the economy to nil and keeping all other coefficients constant, on the other hand.[22]

We ascertain the *gross* and the *net* impact of issues and the economy. The gross effect focuses on *voters* and indicates how many of them would have made a different choice if they had not factored in the issues or the economy, while the net effect focuses on *parties* and indicates how many more (fewer) votes they would have obtained if the issues or the economy had had no effect on the vote.[23] Alvarez *et al.* considered only the latter. We believe that both perspectives are useful and complementary.

We examine all recent elections in Britain, Canada and the United States, a total of eleven elections: the 1988, 1996 and 2000 American presidential elections, the 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001

[22] Let us take the American 1988 presidential election as an example. With the logit estimates reported in Table A1 of the website version of this article, one can compute the probability of voting for Bush for each individual as follows: Prob(Vote for Bush) = 1/(1 + exp(− (− 2.72 × Democrat identifier + 1.22 × Republican identifier + 0.31 × Ideology for Dukakis + 0.26 × Government services for Dukakis − 0.25 × Defence for Dukakis + 0.14 × Health for Dukakis + 0.25 × Government jobs for Dukakis + 0.19 × Russia for Dukakis + 0.33 × Women's rights for Dukakis − 0.13 × Ideology for Bush − 0.24 × Government services for Bush − 0.52 × Defence for Bush − 0.17 × Health for Bush − 0.35 × Government jobs for Bush − 0.20 × Russia for Bush − 0.22 × Women's rights for Bush + 0.83 × Economy (retrospective) − 0.53 × Economy (prospective) + 0.04 × Personal Finances (retrospective) + 0.64 × Personal Finances (prospective) + 0.10 × East + 0.32 × South − 0.04 × West + 0.13 × Age18–29 + 0.36 × Age30–44 − 0.06 × Age45–59 − 0.09 × Education − 0.06 × Female + 2.77))). For each Prob(Vote for Bush) ≥ 0.5, the individual is predicted to vote for Bush. The others are predicted to vote for Dukakis. We can now easily calculate predicted vote shares under the full model for each candidate (or party). To calculate predicted vote shares under the counterfactual models we proceed in the same way except that we fix either all the issue coefficients to 0 (for the issue counterfactual scenario), keeping constant all other coefficients, or all the economic coefficients to 0 (for the economy counterfactual scenario), keeping constant all other coefficients. We compute predicted vote shares for each scenario and compare them with those obtained from the full model.

[23] As indicated in fn. 9, we have a predicted vote choice for all individuals and for all scenarios (i.e. full model scenario, issue counterfactual scenario and economy counterfactual scenario). To compute the *gross* effect, we simply count the number of individuals who are predicted to have a different vote choice under the full model scenario and each of the two counterfactual scenarios. This number is divided by the total number of individuals in the analysis. For example, out of the 649 individuals included in the analysis of the American 1988 presidential election, forty-two are predicted to vote differently under the full model scenario and when the issues are assumed to have no impact on their vote. This gives the figure of 6.5 points reported in Table 1. Of course, many of these movements cancel out since some Bush voters become Dukakis voters, and vice versa. The *net* effect indicates how total vote shares are affected. Here, all in all, twenty fewer individuals are predicted to vote for Dukakis (and twenty more for Bush) when the issues are set to have no impact (compared to the situation under the full model), yielding a net effect of 3.1 percentage points.

British elections, and the 1988, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian elections. We omit from our analysis the 1992 American presidential election, in which Ross Perot obtained a surprising 19 per cent of the vote. The reason is a practical one: the American National Election Study included only one question about respondents' perceptions of Perot's position (on the liberal–conservative scale). In order to estimate the impact of issue distance on the choice between Bush, Clinton and Perot in that election, we would have had to assume that only one issue – the liberal–conservative dimension – mattered. This is clearly a very restrictive – and arguably implausible – assumption, one that is bound to underestimate the impact of issues. Because it is impossible to perform a rigorous and fair test of our hypothesis in that election, the logical solution is to drop that case from consideration.

THE FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the estimated gross and net impact of the issues and the economy on vote choice in each election.[24] The gross impact corresponds to the percentage of voters who are predicted to vote differently whether or not the issues or the economy are factored in. The net impact concerns the effect on parties. It corresponds to the sum, in absolute value, of the difference in the predicted vote for each party under the two scenarios, divided by two.[25]

Table 1 shows that the mean gross impact of issues across these eleven elections is 10 percentage points and the median 9 percentage points. Thus, for about one voter out of ten, issues were a decisive consideration in the sense that they would have voted differently if it had not been for party positions on the issues of the election. The equivalent impact for the economy is 6 and 5 percentage points for the mean and median measures, respectively. The same pattern emerges in each of the three countries. In each country, the economy clearly matters, but issues typically appear to be a more important consideration in vote choice.

The very same pattern emerges when the net effect on parties' vote shares is considered. The mean and median net gains and losses are 6 percentage points for the issues and 2 percentage points for the economy. In each country, the success or failure of the parties has more to do with where they position themselves on the main issues of the day than with the state of the economy.

The figures presented in Table 1 are estimates of the impact of issues and the economy on vote *choice*. It could be argued that vote choice is probabilistic in nature and that it would be as interesting to determine how much effect the issues and the economy have on the predicted *probability of voting* for each party. This can be done in the following way. First, we calculate, for each individual, the absolute change in predicted vote probability (between the full model and the counterfactual 'no effect' scenario) for each party. Secondly, we sum, for each individual, these absolute changes and divide by two. Thirdly, we obtain the gross effect by dividing the sum of the values from step 2 by the number of individuals. This indicates how the probability of voting for a party increases or decreases *for the average* voter when the issues or the economy are assumed to have no effect.[26]

[24] Appendix A of the website version of this article shows the multinomial probit (and binomial logit for two-party vote choice) estimates of the determinants of vote choice in each election. Appendix B presents a description of the variables.

[25] Take for example the British 1987 election. The simulation indicates that the Conservatives gained 12.4 percentage points because of the issues, and the Labour and the Social Democratic Party (SDP)/Liberals Alliance lost 3.0 and 9.3 points, respectively. The net gains and losses add up to 24.7, divided by 2.

[26] We thank one of the referees for suggesting that additional test. A case could also be made for calculating the net impact on the average probability of voting for each party. The mean probability of voting for a party is, however, quite different from the actual vote that a party gets. For example, for the 1987 British general election, our model predicts the following vote percentages for the Conservatives, Labour and the Alliance party respectively: 43.7 per cent, 35.0 per cent and 21.4 per cent. However, the mean probability of voting for each of these parties across all individuals is 38.5 per cent, 37.4 per cent and 27.2 per cent in the respective order. As a consequence, vote probability provides useful information about individual voters' inclinations, but mean vote probabilities do not adequately reflect actual vote support.

TABLE 1 *The Estimated Impact of Issues and the Economy on Vote Choice*

	Gross Effect		Net Effect	
	Issues	Economy	Issues	Economy
Britain				
1987	16.4	8.4	12.4	7.7
1992	8.0	5.1	6.4	0.6
1997	9.2	5.4	5.7	1.7
2001	7.1	7.4	5.7	1.5
Mean	10.2	6.6	7.6	2.9
Median	8.6	6.4	6.1	1.6
Canada				
1988	12.6	6.0	10.4	2.2
1993	10.7	4.3	3.3	1.5
1997	9.1	6.9	1.0	3.3
2000	6.9	9.3	3.1	3.5
Mean	9.8	6.6	4.5	2.6
Median	9.9	6.5	3.2	2.8
United States				
1988	6.5	2.2	3.1	0.3
1996	8.9	4.3	4.1	2.2
2000	11.2	4.5	8.1	1.6
Mean	8.9	3.7	5.1	1.4
Median	8.9	4.3	4.1	1.6
All				
Mean	9.7	5.8	5.8	2.4
Median	9.1	5.4	5.7	1.7

Table 2 summarizes our findings with respect to vote probability. The results are similar to those concerning vote choice. The mean and median effect is 10 points, compared to 5 or 6 for the economy. And that general pattern holds within each of the three countries.

Our conclusions are different from those of Alvarez *et al.* The differences between the two studies originate from a combination of factors. If we focus on what is directly comparable, the relative net impact of issues and the economy in the American 1996 election, the British 1987 election and the Canadian 1988 and 1993 elections, the two studies converge in two cases out of four. According to both studies, the issues seem to have had a greater net effect on the outcome of the British 1987 election as well as in the 1993 Canadian election.

The results diverge, however, in two cases: the 1996 American and the 1988 Canadian elections. Consider the latter case first. We estimate that the issues predominate whereas Alvarez *et al.* impute a greater impact to the economy. The source of divergence is the simulation procedure. The estimate produced by Alvarez *et al.* is based on what the outcome of the vote would have been in 1988, if economic perceptions, instead of being mildly positive as they were that year, had been strongly negative, as they were in the subsequent 1993 election. Our estimate is based on what the outcome would have been if economic perceptions had simply not mattered at all. Our estimate contrasts a mildly positive situation with a neutral one, whereas Alvarez *et al.* contrast it with a strongly negative one. The estimates are different because the questions are different. We want to ascertain the impact of the economy in 1988, while Alvarez *et al.* attempt to determine the effect of the economy on vote shift.

TABLE 2 *The Estimated Impact of Issues and the Economy on Vote Probability*

	Issues	Economy
Britain		
1987	11.4	5.8
1992	6.9	3.4
1997	8.6	4.9
2001	5.8	7.4
Mean	8.2	5.4
Median	7.8	5.4
Canada		
1988	12.8	4.1
1993	9.6	5.3
1997	7.2	6.8
2000	4.5	6.7
Mean	8.5	5.7
Median	8.4	6.0
United States		
1988	12.2	3.4
1996	13.4	9.1
2000	11.9	4.3
Mean	12.5	5.6
Median	12.2	4.3
All		
Mean	9.5	5.6
Median	9.6	5.3

The two studies concur in finding that distance from party positions had a highly significant independent impact on vote choice. According to Alvarez *et al.*, the Conservative lead over the Liberals would have been reduced by 9 points if the latter had staked optimal positions. Note, however, that there is a mismatch in their treatment of the economy and the issues. While they examine the consequences of economic changes between 1988 and 1993 they do not compare party positions over time. In our case, the counterfactual is the same for the two factors: what would have changed if either had had no effect on vote choice?

Our conclusion, that issues mattered more than the economy, seems plausible on substantive grounds. If there was one election that was fought on an issue, it was this one. As Johnston, Blais, Brady and Crête demonstrate, free trade with the United States dominated the consciousness of voters.[27] In fact, the Canadian Election Studies (CES) data indicate that 78 per cent of those in favour of free trade voted Conservative and that 90 per cent of those opposed voted Liberal or for the New Democratic Party (NDP).

The two studies also diverge in their assessment of the 1996 American election. The main difference in this instance concerns the economy. The estimate given by Alvarez *et al.* is that the economy provided Clinton with an 18 point boost over Dole; our estimate is a more modest 4 points. The difference stems again mostly from the fact that our estimate consists in ascertaining what the

[27] Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry E. Brady and Jean Crête, *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 141.