

## BOOK REVIEW

---

**Gabriel S. Lenz.** *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2012. 327 pp. \$90.00 (cloth). \$27.50 (paper).

JENNIFER JERIT  
*Stony Brook University*

A fundamental question about voter behavior is whether citizens lead politicians by judging them on the basis of their policy stands and performance, or whether citizens instead align their views to match those of politicians they favor for other reasons (e.g., character). In *Follow the Leader*, Gabriel Lenz examines this question across more than a dozen cases spanning the United States and Europe. One may wonder how such an important question could remain unanswered after decades of research on electoral politics. The answer, Lenz observes, is simple: previous studies have tended to rely on cross-sectional data and therefore have merely documented an association between policy views and vote choice. When attitudes (e.g., policy views, performance judgments) are measured at the same time as outcomes such as vote choice and presidential approval, one cannot determine which came first. The public may be leading politicians by assessing their policy stands and rewarding or punishing them accordingly. Or, the public may first decide whether they like a politician and then adopt his or her views. The two possibilities are observationally equivalent in cross-sectional data.

Lenz solves this problem by leveraging existing data sets that interview the same respondents at multiple points in time (what researchers call panel surveys) and which allow him to employ an empirical strategy called the “three-wave test.” At the most basic level, the three-wave test examines whether *prior* attitudes (i.e., those measured during an earlier wave of the panel) influence later change in presidential approval, vote choice, or related outcomes. Thus, Lenz can make stronger inferences about whether people bring their support for politicians in line with their earlier stated views (“leading”) or whether they modify their opinions to match their party identification or candidate preferences (“following”). And yet, this simple description does not do justice to the breadth of the empirical analyses Lenz brings to bear in *Follow the Leader*. The panel surveys span a variety of political upheavals—economic booms and busts, political campaigns, wars, and disasters—allowing Lenz to examine three different kinds of shifts in voters’ thinking. The first type of

shift, media priming, occurs when there is an increase in the salience of a policy or performance issue. The second, persuasion, takes place when voters change their views about an issue. And the third, learning, happens when the public increases their knowledge about a politician's policy stand. Because these shifts occur prior to measurement of the dependent variable, Lenz is able to rule out reverse causation. The author also conducts a creative experiment in which he reinterviews respondents from the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), effectively creating a two-wave panel and providing him with crucial pretreatment attitude measures.

So, how does the public fare across these various empirical tests? In the domain of performance judgments, people appear to lead politicians. Lenz reaches this conclusion in Chapter 2, where he examines three cases in which the state of the U.S. economy became a prominent issue during the presidential campaign. Across the 1980, 1992, and 1996 elections, the mass media devoted sustained attention to the economy. Comparing the period before an increase in media attention to the period afterward, Lenz observes an increase in the influence of economic perceptions on presidential approval. He concludes that voters were judging politicians on the basis of economic performance—punishing Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush in 1980 and 1992 and rewarding Bill Clinton in 1996.

In Chapter 3, a similar test is conducted for ten cases in which a policy issue receives heightened attention (nine of the cases are historical examples of media priming; the last case is a survey experiment). In contrast to performance judgments, people do not base their vote on policy issues even as media coverage of these topics increases. Thus, for example, despite intense media coverage of the issue of investing Social Security funds in the 2000 U.S. presidential election (emanating from presidential debates and television advertising), voters were no more likely to judge the candidates on this issue at the end of the campaign than they were six months earlier. In other words, voters did not seem to be rewarding (punishing) the candidates who agreed (disagreed) with them on this issue. Lenz observes a similar pattern in chapters analyzing persuasion and learning. In Chapter 4, he finds that when people change their performance assessments, they subsequently alter their support for politicians, but when they change their opinion on policy issues, they do not later change their vote or candidate evaluation. Even when the author focuses on people who were newly informed about candidate or party positions (Chapter 5), this information did not play an important role in subsequent candidate evaluations or vote choice.

Although detailed analyses of two of his cases (the 1986 Dutch parliamentary elections in Chapter 6 and the 1980 U.S. presidential election in Chapter 7) paint an arguably more optimistic picture of citizen performance, Chapter 8 presents some of the most conclusive evidence for following. There, Lenz demonstrates that across a wide range of topics, people change their policy views to be in line with their votes, candidate evaluations, and party

allegiances. One of the most striking findings involves ideology, with people changing their self-reported ideology to be more consistent with the party of the president they support. Thus, the public appears to follow politicians even when it comes to an outcome that has long been thought of as a stable predisposition. Not too surprisingly, Lenz's assessment of the state of modern democracy (Chapter 9) is less than positive.

With its creative use of existing panel data and extensive empirical analyses, this book puts research on issue voting on sounder empirical footing. However, as the author acknowledges, there are advantages and disadvantages with the empirical strategy he adopts. Although the three-wave test using panel data is superior to past approaches when it comes to making causal claims, the very nature of the data (i.e., the fact that observations are sometimes separated by long periods of time) causes its own potential problems. Lenz observes that this "time lag problem" may mask some of the effects he is looking for (if, say, a person's vote decision was influenced by media priming or persuasion before the later wave occurred). Another limitation, also acknowledged by the author, is that the analysis looks for evidence only among people who experience media priming, persuasion, or learning (what he characterizes as a "local treatment effect"). In other words, Lenz may be missing policy voting among people who care so much about a particular issue that it always has high salience and their opinions on the issue remain stable. To his credit, Lenz provides extensive discussion of these potential problems and allays the reader's concerns with some very convincing auxiliary analyses. Nevertheless, the fact that policy voting occurs among some segments of the population and that elites occasionally change their positions in response to citizen views (Chapters 6 and 7) suggests some room for optimism.

These minor issues aside, *Follow the Leader* is certain to become an important book because of how clearly it illustrates and then addresses a fatal flaw in past research on voting behavior. Additionally, the book paves the way for future scholars seeking to investigate any one of the questions raised in the concluding chapter, such as why performance voting is more common than policy voting and the role of elite strategy in this regard. For all of these reasons, Lenz's book represents a major advance in the study of voting behavior.

doi:10.1093/poq/nft014