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Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance (Chicago Studies in American Politics)

Gabriel S. Lenz

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In a democracy, we generally assume that voters know the policies they prefer and elect like-minded officials who are responsible for carrying them out. We also assume that voters consider candidates' competence, honesty, and other performance-related traits. But does this actually happen? Do voters consider candidates' policy positions when deciding for whom to vote? And how do politicians' performances in office factor into the voting decision?

In *Follow the Leader?,* Gabriel S. Lenz sheds light on these central questions of democratic thought. Lenz looks at citizens' views of candidates both before and after periods of political upheaval, including campaigns, wars, natural disasters, and episodes of economic boom and bust. Noting important shifts in voters' knowledge and preferences as a result of these events, he finds that, while citizens do assess politicians based on their performance, their policy positions actually matter much less. Even when a policy issue becomes highly prominent, voters rarely shift their votes to the politician whose position best agrees with their own. In fact, Lenz shows, the reverse often takes place: citizens first pick a politician and then adopt that politician's policy views. In other words, they follow the leader.

Based on data drawn from multiple countries, *Follow the Leader?* is the most definitive treatment to date of when and why policy and performance matter at the voting booth, and it will break new ground in the debates about democracy.

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