

***It's No Longer the Economy, Stupid:* Selective Perception and Attribution of Economic Outcomes**

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Abstract: Scholars of American politics have long touted retrospective economic voting as a means by which citizens capably exercise democratic accountability, despite their overall inattentiveness to politics, and susceptibility to elite manipulation. In an era of runaway polarization, this may no longer be true. Using data from the American National Election Study, General Social Survey, and original survey experiments, I present evidence that the relationship between incumbent reelection and economic performance has weakened considerably. I argue that the decline is explained by two psychological mechanisms for motivated reasoning: first, citizens are likelier to misperceive the economy if the alternative would mean acknowledging the seeming successes of the other party, or the apparent failings of their own. Second, even when citizens perceive the economy correctly, they often selectively attribute actual credit or blame for economic outcomes in a manner consistent with their partisanship. I present evidence not only that citizens regularly engage in selective perception and selective attribution, but that they trade off between the two depending on which, in a given election, requires the least cognitive effort for maintaining the perceived superiority of their own party. Both the decline of economic voting and the patterns of motivated reasoning underlying it suggest a serious challenge for democratic accountability in an affectively polarized era.

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For decades, scholars of American politics (and political science broadly) have argued that citizens lack the sophistication, attention, and interest in politics necessary to hold their political representatives accountable for their performance in office (Campbell et al 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Achen and Bartels 2017; Freeder, Lenz and Turney 2018). To absolve them of this failure, political scientists have looked for ways by which seemingly incapable voters are nevertheless able to perform their democratic duties. Some scholarship has emphasized the value of heuristics (Lupia 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Gigerenzer, Czerlinski, and Martignon 1999; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Gilens 2011), which voters can use to make decisions similar to those they would make under fully informed conditions. Other work has focused on voters' apparent use of retrospective voting (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). People often lack the high degree of political knowledge necessary for engaging in prospective voting, but as Fiorina has previously argued, "voters typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent administration." (Fiorina 1981) By simply evaluating whether their own lives have improved under the incumbent, citizens can punish politicians who have mismanaged the economy, or reward those who appear to have done well. Of course, presidents have only a limited amount of actual control over economic outcomes, which are impacted greatly by cyclical patterns, international developments, and the decisions of private actors. While economic voting is far from perfect as an accountability mechanism, under it, politicians, anticipating that they will later be held responsible for the economy, should be more likely to take action to improve its strength, especially in the eyes of the median voter.

Indeed, strong evidence shows that incumbent vote share is at least partially determined by economic performance (Kramer 1971; Fair 1978; Kiewit 1983) – as James Carville’s famous quote goes, “it’s the economy, stupid.” Scholars generally consider the state of the economy to be second only to partisan identity in determining vote choice in presidential elections, and economic indicators (most commonly the year-to-year change in real disposable income) feature prominently in most election prediction models (Hibbs 2000; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2003; Lock and Gelman 2010; Blumenthal 2014). Of course, political scientists have highlighted a number of problems with retrospective voting: citizens tend to focus only on the most recent economic developments, ignoring what happens in the first few years of a presidential administration, a practice referred to as myopia (Mackuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Alesina, Londregan, and Rosenthal 1993; Achen and Bartels 2004); voters often appear to hold politicians accountable for events such as floods, droughts, and shark attacks that are clearly out of their control (Healy and Malhotra 2009; Healy, Malhotra and Mo 2010; Achen and Bartels 2016); they also have a tendency to assume the economy is better when their party is in power, and vice versa (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). While these are important problems, scholars have missed a greater threat to retrospective voting – economic performance may simply no longer have the significant impact on incumbent vote share it once did.

I present evidence of this declining relationship using several decades of data on presidential vote share and national economic conditions, supplemented by analysis of data from the American National Election Study and General Social Survey. By tracking the correlation between economic indicators and incumbent vote share over time, it becomes clear that this linchpin of democratic accountability has weakened greatly. The remainder of the paper explains

how this is possible, especially given that voters do not seem to have lost interest in the economy as a key object of political evaluation. Though acknowledging many potential explanations for this decline, I focus on rising political polarization and its ramifications on citizen psychology. As partisan identity becomes increasingly important, citizens should become less concerned with making accurate, fair evaluations of the economy, and more concerned with defending the performance of their team, and/or attacking that of the other. In doing so, I argue that partisans will employ two strategies. First, partisans might engage in *selective perception* – assuming the economy under their own party’s president is strong, or weak under the other party’s president, even if untrue. Second, they might instead practice *selective attribution* – accepting the state of the economy, but blaming poor performance by an incumbent from their own party on bad luck and outside factors, or crediting strong performance by the other party as merely serendipitous.

Using a combination of observational and experimental evidence, I show that partisans engage in both selective perception and selective attribution, and that their usage of such strategies increases significantly over time. While scholars and journalists have known for some time that partisans engage in selective perception, no study to date tracks its rise over time, and only one (Bisgaard 2015) acknowledges the use of selective attribution (though not in the American context). Most importantly, scholars have missed the importance of the relationship between these two strategies, which I argue are employed in a complementary fashion. People protect their beliefs by engaging in motivated reasoning (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979; Kunda 1990; Jerit and Barabas 2012), but when evidence against one’s own priors grows overwhelming, denial of reality becomes difficult (Redlawsk, Civettini and Emerson 2010). Accordingly, in a polarized environment, an incumbent’s co-partisans will maintain belief in their competent

handling of the economy, but struggle to do so during recessions. I provide evidence that citizens prefer selective perception, but during particularly strong or weak economies, they switch to selective attribution. This tradeoff ensures a lack of partisan accountability even when it is most needed. Under very high partisan polarization, economic retrospective voting may no longer play the significant role in vote choice that scholars have long found that it does, providing elected officials with even fewer incentives for managing the economy to the benefit of all.

A Declining Relationship Between Vote Choice and Economic Performance

Despite increasing polarization, do citizens still regularly consider the state of the economy when choosing which presidential candidate to vote for? Only recently have scholars of American politics begun to present evidence that this relation may be declining (Donovan et al 2019). To test this, I look at how the correlation between key economic performance variables and the incumbent's share of the two-party vote changes over time. If voters are increasingly unwilling to cross party lines due to strong or weak economic performance under the incumbent, then we should see a negative relationship between the two variables over time, perhaps starting around the 1980s, when scholars generally agree polarization began noticeably increasing.

First, I gather data on several key economic indicators. The primary indicator of interest is the national change in real disposable income between the election year and the preceding year, keeping in accordance with prior studies that have found voters primarily focus on recent changes to the economy (voters are myopic and discount performance in non-election years) at the national level (local conditions matter, but the effect is smaller and more inconsistent) when voting retrospectively, and that real disposable income is the indicator most consistent with a

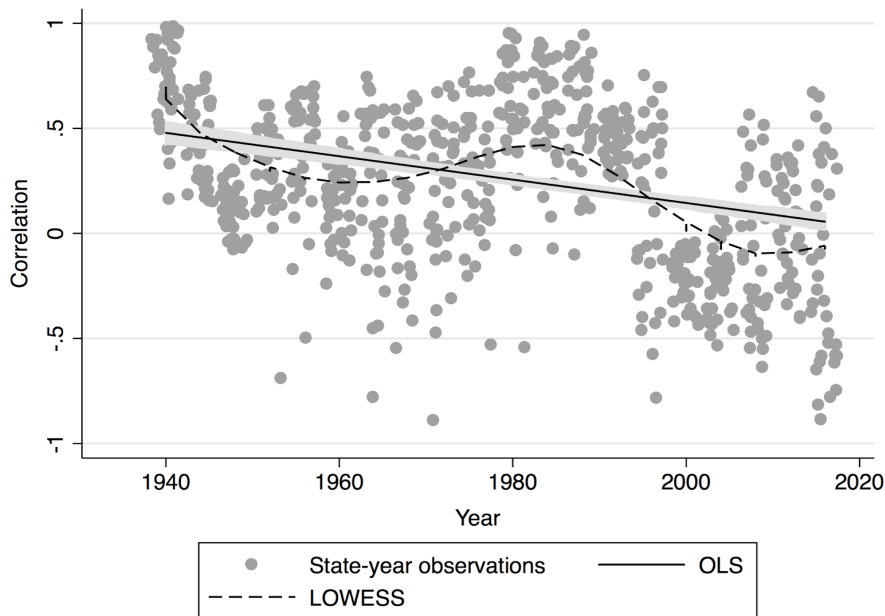
strong relationship (Mackuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Alesina, Londregan, and Rosenthal 1993; Achen and Bartels 2004). My data on RDI come from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. While prior studies have found that real disposable income is the best predictor of incumbent vote share, given that I am considering over-time changes in its value as a predictor, it is possible that other indicators have become more predictive over time. To account for this, I also collect data on the unemployment rate and the S&P 500, both from the U.S. Federal Reserve. To best reflect conditions at the time of the election, I use data from October for all indicators. For two-party vote share, I use two-party presidential vote-share at the county level, as the paucity of observations at the national or even state levels makes over-time analysis difficult. To get this, I use data from Healy and Lenz (2014), which provides vote share at the county-level from 1928-present for all counties. These files also contain the total counts of votes within each county for each year, which I use as population weights in these analyses.

With this data, I then compute a series of rolling correlations between RDI and vote share across time. For a given state-year, I take the correlation between the year-to-year difference in RDI and vote share from each county in a given state for that year and the previous two election years, doing so in all election years for which I also had data for the two preceding elections, and accounting for population differences between counties by weighting by county vote total. I use these year bins to achieve variation on change in RDI which, as it is measured at the national level, is constant for all observations within a given year. For instance, the correlation for Alabama in 2016 is computed on the weighted average of correlations between vote share and RDI change in all Alabama counties across 2008, 2012, and 2016. I drop from analysis any states with less than 25 counties, as correlations obtained from such states were highly variant and

therefore unreliable (dropping these states from the analysis does not change the final outcome). This procedure generates correlations for 36 states in each election year between 1940 and 2016. I then plot the change in size of correlations over time, weighting by state population.

Figure 1 below shows this relationship plotted using both the line of best fit using both OLS and LOWESS specifications. Each observation in the plot represents a single state-year correlation between incumbent vote-share and RDI. The once-strong relationship, above 0.3 on average prior to 1980, declines to nearly zero by 2016. The mean correlation for all observations prior to the 1990s is 0.35, whereas from the 1990s on, it averages just -0.01, a highly significant difference (95% confidence intervals on the latter statistic range from -0.06 to 0.04). This decline is remarkably consistent regardless of whether this analysis is repeated using the unemployment rate or the S&P 500 (see SI Section 2.1 for details). The LOWESS estimate, which detects non-linear local changes, shows two periods of decline, one between 1940-1960, and another roughly between 1984-2004. The former of these two declines is consistent with the end of the Great Depression (economic voting, unsurprisingly, would be particularly common in a period of such great economic need), while the latter occurs during the period primarily associated with rising polarization. In particular, beginning around 1996, a large number of states actually show significantly *negative* correlations, suggesting their citizens increasingly support the incumbent as economic performance *worsens*. To confirm these results are not spurious, I report several robustness checks in the SI, such as using regression coefficients (SI Section 2.2), using two or four-year election windows instead of the three used above (SI Section 2.3), or grouping by counties (SI Section 2.4). In none of these alternative specifications do the results change.

Figure 1: Decreasing Correlation Between Real Disposable Income and Two-Party Vote



Note: N=792. Confidence intervals are 95%. Each observation represents the average correlation (weighted by vote total) between incumbent vote share and year-to-year change in real disposable income for all counties within a state, across that and the previous two elections.

Other potential challenges to the above findings exist. Perhaps the apparent decline in economic voting is an artifact of the grouping strategies I use, or it can be explained by some omitted variable bias. To address these and other possibilities, Table 1 below reports results from a series of OLS regression models. In each model, the dependent variable is the incumbent party's share of the two-party presidential vote, while the right side of the equation contains a measure of economic performance (typically, as above, year-to-year change in real disposable income), year, and an interaction between the two. If economic voting is on the decline, then the interaction term should be significant and negative. The third column reports the beta coefficient and standard error for the interaction term in each of these models, while the fourth, fifth and sixth columns report T-statistic, R-squared, and the number of observations, respectively.

Table 1: Alternative Model Specifications for the Decline of Economic Voting

Row	Model description	b (SE)	T-stat	R2	N
1	RDI*year interaction effect on incumbent vote	-0.034 (0.0023)	-14.53	0.07	58794
	Controls				
2	...with control for lagged incumbent vote	-0.038 (0.0024)	-16.05	0.08	58559
3	...and control for county income	-0.038 (0.0024)	-16.11	0.08	58559
4	...and control for year squared	-0.035 (0.0024)	-14.75	0.08	58559
5	...and control for district partisanship	-0.033 (0.0020)	-15.97	0.34	58559
	Fixed Effects				
6	Row 5, with state fixed effects	-0.040 (0.0025)	-15.63	0.11	58881
7	Row 5, with county fixed effects	-0.011 (0.0023)	-4.34	0.15	58880
	Alternative Independent Variable Measures				
8	Row 5, using CPI instead of RDI	-0.046 (0.0021)	-21.68	0.26	58559
9	Row 5, using S&P 500 instead of RDI	-0.0023 (0.0003)	-8.20	0.25	58559
	Subgroups by County Partisanship				
10	Row 5, Lowest margin of victory quartile	-0.0302 (0.0026)	-11.54	0.35	14533
11	Row 5, Second lowest margin of victory quartile	-0.0213 (0.0037)	-5.81	0.39	14732
12	Row 5, Second highest margin of victory quartile	-0.0459 (0.0050)	-9.00	0.29	14699
13	Row 5, Highest margin of victory quartile	-0.0389 (0.0062)	-6.23	0.41	14595

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Observations are weighted by population using each county-year's vote total. All reported coefficients above are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Row 1, the simplest version of this model, shows the hypothesized highly significant, negative interaction between RDI and year. Rows 2 and 3 report the same model, but with controls for incumbent vote share in the last election and county-level average real disposable income, which slightly increase the strength of the finding. To account for potential non-linear effects, Row 4 uses year squared instead of year, which makes no difference. To reduce noise within the model by removing any impact of partisan voting patterns within counties, Row 5 includes an interaction between lagged incumbent vote share and an indicator for a change in the

party of the incumbent president, which also makes no difference. Rows 6 and 7 include fixed effects at both the state and county levels. While the inclusion of fixed effects either strengthens or weakens the finding, depending on the unit of analysis, the results either way remain highly significant, suggesting that it is within-unit, not between-unit, variation that accounts for the decline in the relationship over time. To test the possibility that voters are becoming more sensitive to some alternative measure of economic performance, rows 8 and 9 report the model using changes in the Consumer Price Index and the S&P 500, respectively, instead of RDI. Regardless of specification, all results remain highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

Finally, to get a sense of the extent of this problematic decline in economic voting, we might want to see whether it has occurred generally, or only in highly partisan counties. After all, if retrospective voting has only declined in places where the incumbent regularly wins in a landslide, but has remained intact elsewhere, the damage to democratic accountability might be less severe. Furthermore, this may provide some clue as to the mechanism for the decline; if it is driven by polarization, then we would expect to see the greatest decline in counties that lean heavily towards one party or the other. To test this, I create a measure of over-time county partisanship by taking the average margin of victory of the incumbent for all elections in that county across all years in the dataset, then dividing all observations into quartiles. Rows 10-13 report the results of the Row 3 regression model for each of these groups separately, and confirm the hypothesis that the magnitude of decline generally grows with average margin of victory. While this is true, the decline is still highly significant even in counties with the lowest average margin of incumbent victory — in other words, in swing counties in which careful monitoring of economic performance by voters could actually flip the results of an election. While during an

earlier period of American politics it could fairly be claimed that voters are quite responsive to economic conditions, given the preceding evidence, it is no longer clearly so.

Explaining the Decline of Economic Voting

Despite its longstanding reputation among scholars of American politics, economic performance seems to be deteriorating as a means by which voters hold political leaders democratically accountable. What accounts for this decline? In the remainder of this paper, I provide an explanation that relies upon polarization – as partisan attachment grows, economic performance becomes increasingly crowded out as a primary matter of public concern. From there, my account rests upon psychological pressure among citizens to protect their deeply-felt partisan identity (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004), either by denying the reality of economic outcomes, or attributing outcomes differentially.

To do so, I expect them to engage in some combination of two forms of motivated reasoning. First, voters may engage in *selective perception* of the economy. That is, partisans will assume that political representatives from their team, given they ostensibly possess the right values and the right policies, will capably manage national economic performance, while those from the other side will not, regardless of actual economic outcomes. A citizen who does so might receive ambiguous or contradictory economic signals, and choose to interpret them in a partisan-consistent manner. Alternatively, they might dispute whether clear economic signals effectively measure real economic performance (for instance, whether the U6 measure of unemployment fairly accounts for part-time and disaffected workers).

Second, voters may engage in *selective attribution* – that is, they attribute credit for a good economy to the government primarily when it is controlled by co-partisans, and blame for a

bad economy primarily when the other side has control. Alternatively, when the inparty presides over bad economies, or the outparty over good, citizens explain away these inconvenient truths by attributing the state of the economy to non-political factors (e.g. business cycles), outside actors (e.g. international markets), or simply chance. As the discernment of responsibility for economic outcomes requires a higher cognitive load than simple denial of the economy in its current state, I expect this strategy becomes increasingly preferred as the economy becomes more obviously strong or weak, and the denial of reality in turn becomes more effortful.

This is not to say that alternative explanations do not exist. For instance, it may be that rising elite ideological polarization has made the public more ideologically polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), in which case newly-ideological voters may be more concerned with non-economic policy outcomes and/or rhetoric delivered by the parties, although some may question whether the public has indeed polarized ideologically enough to have had this effect (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2008). Another possibility is that voters are not choosing to reject economic reality themselves, but instead are increasingly dependent upon a media landscape that, once relatively unified in message, now may provide differential signals about the economy to satisfy and/or mobilize their partisan audience. This is certainly consistent with what we know about partisan adoption of ingroup media messages (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2013). I consider these explanations to be complementary to my own, and while I do not test these possibilities here, researchers should be encouraged to do so in the future.

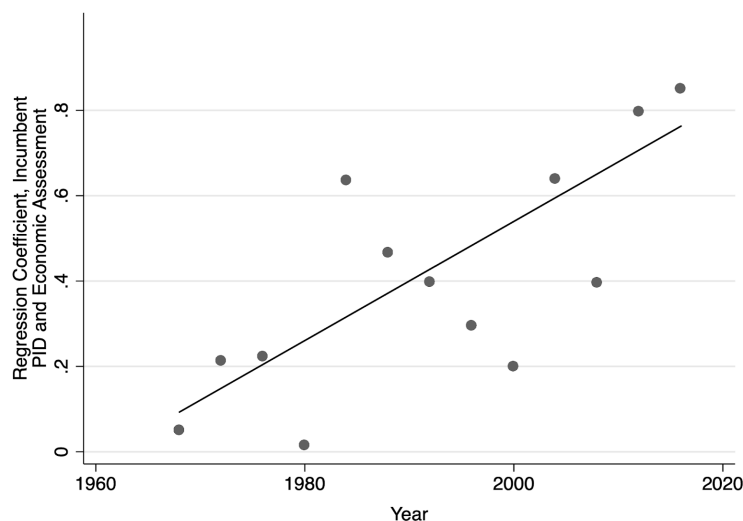
Mechanism 1: The Rise of Selective Perception

Over time, are citizens more likely to misperceive (or at least report misperceptions) the state of the economy when economic reality does not comport with their partisanship? While we know that citizens engage in selective perception about the economy, previous studies have not tracked how this phenomenon changes over time.

As a simple test of this, I first look to see how the relationship between economic evaluations and partisanship has changed in the last several decades. If partisan affiliation increasingly leads citizens to perceive the economy incorrectly, then partisanship should be an increasingly strong predictor of economic evaluations. From 1962 to the present, the American National Election Study asks respondents whether, over the past year, the economy has gotten better, worse, or stayed the same. I use this as my dependent variable in a simple bivariate OLS regression model, where the independent variable represents strength of partisan identity relative to the party of the incumbent president. The variable is constructed from 0 to 1 such that 1 represents a strong partisan from the incumbent's party and 0 a strong partisan from the opposite party, with five other scale points in between (all independents are scored at 0.5). Figure 2 below tracks the OLS regression coefficient of partisanship on economic evaluations for each election year, 1968-2016, estimated separately. An increasingly positive correlation means that as one's strength of identification with the incumbent party increases, their economic ratings become more positive. In the period prior to 1980, the coefficient averages about 0.15, while post-2000, it now averages around 0.6, a fourfold increase in magnitude. These results are robust regardless of whether sample weights are used, or whether data in later years is restricted to face-to-face respondents only (see SI Section 2.5).

While this test demonstrates that the impact of partisanship on economic assessments increases over time, it does not establish the degree to which this actually leads citizens to perceive the state of the economy incorrectly. To better demonstrate this, I use time-series data from the American National Election Study's pre-election interviews, in conjunction with economic data, to see whether citizens from the incumbent president's party are increasingly more likely than the other party to evaluate the economy accurately.

Figure 2: Impact of Partisanship on Economic Evaluations Over Time



Note: N=18,191 across 13 election years. Each data point above represents the bivariate regression coefficient of partisanship on evaluations of the economy over the past year.

To objectively evaluate the state of the economy in a given year, I use an economic index provided by FiveThirtyEight, which averages changes in seven different economic indicators (nonfarm payrolls, personal income, industrial production, personal consumption expenditures, inflation, forecasted GDP, and the S&P 500 index) in the month prior to the election (see SI

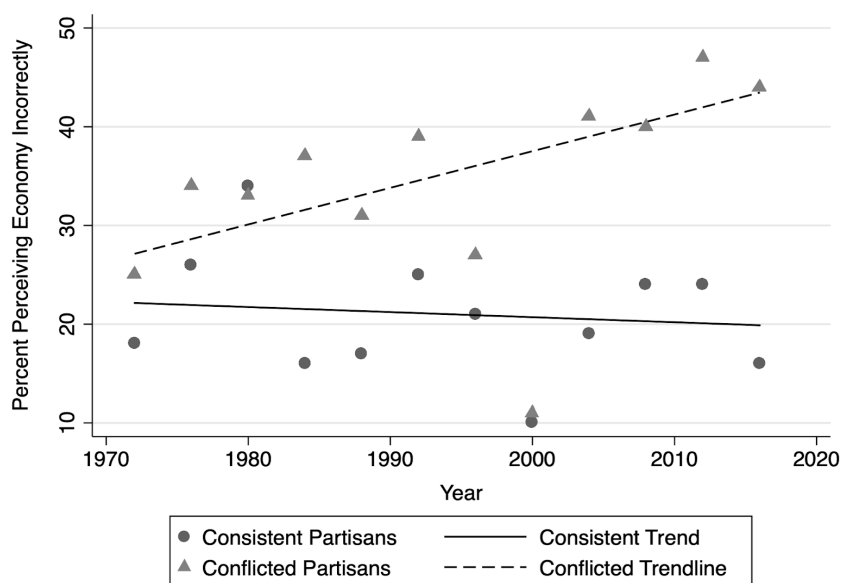
Section 2.6 for more detail). According to this model, the economy is average or above when the index reaches at least 3%, and below average otherwise. For the time period I examine (1962-2016), there are three election years in which the index is below 3%: 1980, 1992, and 2008. In the case of 1980 (-2.5%) and 2008 (-2.1%), the economy a month before the election was clearly in bad shape, while this is more ambiguous in 1992 (1.6%). Still, coverage of the election at the time was uniformly negative regarding the economy, and Bush is widely perceived to have lost his election bid due to economic weakness. Then, using the same ANES question from the previous test, for each election year, I code survey respondents as “misperceivers” if they answer the economy is “getting better” in 1980, 1992, and 2008, or “getting worse” in other years. This scheme understates misperceptions, as those who say things “stayed the same” even during, for instance, a booming 1984 economy are counted as correct.

I then look to see how misperception differs depending on partisanship. Henceforth, I refer to “conflicted” versus “consistent” partisans. The “consistent” label refers to respondents for whom economic reality is consistent with their desired beliefs about economic stewardship – citizens are labeled as consistent when their own party occupies the White House during a good economy, or when the other party presides over a bad economy. “Conflicted” citizens, on the other hand, should feel some pressure to misperceive or misrepresent the economy, as their own party presides over a bad economy, or the other party over a good one.

Using these classifications, Figure 3 below shows how the accuracy of these two groups in evaluating the economy changes differentially over time. Consistent partisans tend to be fairly accurate in their evaluations over the whole period, with only an average of about 20% at any time differing from objective evaluations, and with only a single election higher than 25%. More

importantly, this trend changes little over time, with consistent voters even getting slightly more accurate over time. On the other hand, conflicted partisans exhibit much greater inaccuracy, averaging about 36% and, crucially, getting much worse over time; since 2000, conflicted partisans have never held inaccuracy rates lower than 40%. While at the beginning of this period, the gap between conflicted and consistent partisans was fewer than 10 points, by the end, the gap is nearly 30 points, a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$). These findings hold regardless of whether face-to-face samples are included, or if sample weights are used (see SI Section 2.7).

Figure 3: Economic Misperceptions Over Time (American National Election Study)



Note: N=27,875. 95% confidence intervals (not shown above) for each group do not overlap.

Given that the ANES is an explicitly political survey in nature, respondents who are asked economic questions are particularly likely to frame their evaluations in a partisan manner. For surveys such as the GSS that are not primarily political, but in which respondents are

nevertheless asked to evaluate the economy, we might not expect to find similar levels of selective perception. This is consistent with previous work showing that these surveys differ in terms of their ability to politicize respondents (Sears and Lau 1983; Wilcox and Wlezien 1993). In fact, I find that the GSS shows no change over time in the relationship between economic perceptions and partisanship. Rather than cast doubt on rising selective perception, however, I argue that this disconnect reinforces the partisan nature of this phenomenon; when political identities are activated, citizens engage in effortful defense of them, and when they are not, they are more likely to see the world for what it is. Given that an actual election clearly mirrors the partisan context of the ANES much more closely than the non-partisan GSS, we should consider the results from the ANES better reflective of the thought processes that will influence actual voting behavior, especially in light of evidence of declining economic voting. For a detailed discussion, refer to SI Section 2.8.

Mechanism 2: Selective Attribution

Selective attribution is defined here as the tendency of partisans to offer or withhold attribution to the government for economic outcomes depending on which party controls the government during that period. We would expect consistent partisans (those whose party oversees a good economy, or for whom the opposition oversees a bad one) to attribute economic outcomes to government policies, and conflicted partisans (vice versa) to attribute those same outcomes to chance or outside factors. While the literature has previously recognized the role of selective perception, scholars have largely missed the important role that selective attribution may play in the electorate's ability to hold political leaders accountable for economic

stewardship. Only one previous study (Bisgaard 2015) has found, in the case of British elections, that partisans differentially attribute credit for economic performance. Ideally, as with selective perception, we would track the increased usage of selective attribution over time, but unfortunately, survey questions about attribution are rare and inconsistently used. Still, it is possible to determine whether respondents appear to engage in selective attribution in recent U.S. elections. To do so, in this section, I first present findings from two original survey experiments about presidential economic performance. The first of these shows that individuals engage in selective attribution with generalized information about partisan economic performance over time, while the second experiment assesses selective attribution in the case of individual presidential performance. Finally, I offer an analysis of ANES data during a brief period in which attribution questions were asked.

Experiment 1: Selective Attribution, Overall Economic Performance

In this first experiment, I provide respondents with varying information about the performance of the economy under Democratic and Republican administrations, aggregated across the last several decades. In the second experiment, I vary the president in question (Obama or Trump) and then ask respondents to evaluate both the state of the economy and the president's responsibility for it.

Respondents in Experiment 1 (n=254) were randomly assigned to receive one of two messages about how well the parties had done in managing the post-WW2 economy. The content of these messages reflects the fact that from 1948-2005, Democratic presidents oversaw greater overall income growth than Republicans, but that Republicans had the better record when

analysis is restricted to election years (Bartels 2016). Taking advantage of this ambiguity, one message claimed that Republicans had the better record over the period, while the other said that Democrats did.¹ Respondents were shown one of these two messages, and then were asked what explained why one party did better than the other. I asked them to rate the quality of two explanations (“poor” to “strong”, 5 point scale), that a) the policies of that party are better at producing income growth (henceforth referred to as the “skill” explanation), and b) that party was simply lucky to have been in power during times when the economy was better, for reasons beyond their control (the “luck” explanation).

Table 2: Attribution of Economic Performance by Partisanship

	Average Good Motive Rating	Average Bad Motive Rating	Good-Bad, Avg Difference	% with Good Motive Higher
Party Ingroup	3.98 (0.083)	2.36 (0.107)	1.62	72 (0.039)
Party Outgroup	2.48 (0.100)	3.41 (0.100)	-0.93	19 (0.036)
Difference	1.5	-1.05	2.55	53

Note: N=132 for all ingroup statistics above, N=122 for all outgroup statistics. Standard errors in parentheses. All differences are significant at the $p>0.001$ level.

Table 2 shows the differences between how respondents answered these questions depending on their assignment to their own party or the outparty. Column 1 shows that ingroup respondents thought the skill explanation was strong (3.98 out of a possible 5), while outgroup respondents (2.48) found it considerably weaker. These respondents instead preferred the luck explanations. Overall, as shown in column 4, 72% of ingroup respondents thought their party’s performance was better explained by skill than luck, while only 19% felt the same in the

¹ The pro-Republican message mentioned this was for election years only, though this was de-emphasized in the question wording. All respondents were debriefed at the end of the survey, learning the facts as presented in Bartels’ book. For specifics on question wording, see SI Section 3.4.

outgroup. The results of this experiment demonstrate that citizens do not have a fixed understanding of the effect government officials have on the economy; when confronted with the evidence that the other side is better at handling the economy, respondents explain this away by assuming politicians are not primarily responsible for the outcomes over which they preside.

Experiment 2: Selective Attribution, Recent Economic Performance

In a second experiment, I ask mTurk respondents (n=1093) two questions about politics and the recent state of the economy. In one question, respondents are asked to think about the degree to which the state of the economy is determined by actions taken by the president versus outside forces beyond his control, using a seven-point Likert scale. In the other, I ask them to rate the quality of the economy under a recent president on another seven-point Likert scale. For both questions, I randomize whether the president is Obama or Trump and, to eliminate order effects, the order in which the questions are asked. In the case of Obama, respondents were asked to think about the state of the economy in 2016 specifically, while respondents in the Trump condition were asked to think about 2017. Given the close proximity of these two periods, and the similarity of economic performance between them, all respondents are given a case in which the performance of the economy is undeniably strong.

This experiment allows us to see whether and the degree to which respondents engage in both selective perception and selective attribution. If respondents perceive the economy selectively, respondents in the inparty president condition should have more positive views of the economy than those in the outparty condition. Next, if respondents engage in selective attribution, inparty raters should attribute greater control of the economy to the president as

evaluations of the president's handling of the economy improve, while for outparty raters, this relationship should be reversed.

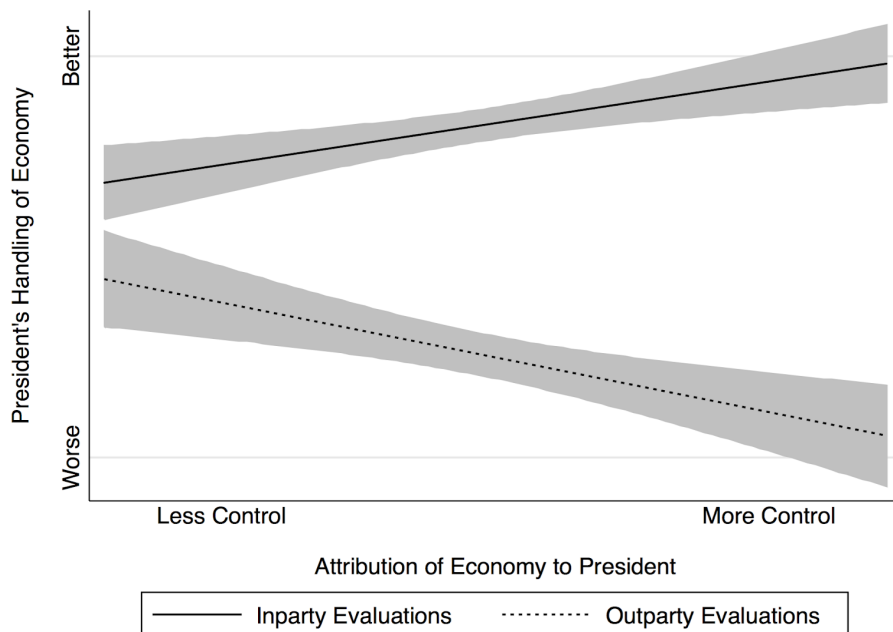
First, looking at selective perception, the findings from the ANES are reconfirmed. Only 11% of inparty subjects claimed the state of the economy was “mediocre” (the scale midpoint) or worse, compared to 54% of outparty subjects, a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$). This 43-point gap is even larger than the 30-point gap observed among ANES respondents.

Next, we look at selective attribution. Subjects' economic attributions change, as expected, depending on the president referenced and their beliefs about the economy. Only 29% of outgroup subjects who perceived the economy correctly said the president, not other forces, primarily controlled economic outcomes; for those who incorrectly thought the economy was weak, this number rises to 46%. About 39% of ingroup subjects who saw the economy as good thought the president was in control, a 10 point difference. Figure 4 below shows the results of the experiment more directly. The relationship between economic rating and attributed economic control is shown in solid for ingroup subjects, and dashed for outgroup subjects. For the former, as expected, their perception of the economy is greater at all levels of attributed control, but improves as attribution grows. For outgroup subjects, we see the opposite pattern, with their evaluation of the economy declining as they increasingly attribute it to the incumbent president. The order in which the questions were asked does not seem to matter, as effects are significant regardless of order for both ingroup and outgroup respondents (see SI Section 4.1 for details).

Observational Data from the ANES, 1984-1996

Beginning in 1984, the ANES asked respondents to rate the effect of the policies of the federal government on the national economy as making it “better”, “worse”, or “no difference” (see SI Section 3.2 for question wording). While this question was unfortunately retired in 1996, for four presidential elections, I am able to see how respondents’ answers change depending on

Figure 4: Selective Attribution by Partisan Attachment



Note: N=853. Confidence intervals are 95%.

their partisanship and that of the incumbent president. When the economy is good, citizens who share the partisan identity of the president should say it was the government’s policies that made it better, while citizens of the other party should be more likely to claim government policy had no effect or weakened a good economy; when the economy is bad, the reverse should be true.

Each cell in Table 3 below shows the percentage of respondents in that category who attributed

economic performance to the government in that year; for instance, in 1984, 78% of Republicans who saw the economy as improving attributed the booming economy to Reagan’s policies, while only 55% of Democrats did. The attribution difference between partisans who saw the economy the same is shown in each “difference” row. The “Avg” column shows the average difference for each group across these four elections. For those who perceive the economy as getting better, citizens who share their party with the president are 16 points more likely to attribute economic performance to the government than those who do not. When the economy is seen as getting worse, citizens from the opposite party of the president are 18 points more likely than those on the other side to do the same.

Table 3: Selective Partisan Attribution of Economic Performance, 1984-1996, ANES

		Percent Attributing Outcome to Government, by Election Year				
		1984	1988	1992	1996	Avg
Economy perceived as getting better	Inparty	78	59	33*	54	56
	Outparty	55	46*	24*	34	40
	Difference	23	13	9	20	16
Economy perceived as getting worse	Inparty	48	39	46	34	42
	Outparty	63	63	58	54	60
	Difference	-15	-24	-12	-20	-18

Note: N=3,365. An asterisk indicates less than 10% of sample held this belief about the economy.

Tradeoffs Between Selective Perception and Attribution

In the previous sections, I provided evidence that citizens act in defense of their parties by engaging in selective perception and attribution when evaluating economic performance. In this section, I show that these two mechanisms complement one another. When people attempt to

maintain their priors, they do so by the principle of least effort – that is, they will use the simplest psychological trick available to them, and eschew rationalizations that are more cognitively effortful (Kunda 1990; Zipf 2016). When the state of the economy is at all ambiguous, selective perception is arguably the easier of the two; simply stating the “bad” party delivered the “bad” outcome is easier than thinking through whether their policy efforts actually resulted in such a situation. However, when the economy is particularly strong or weak, it becomes difficult to convince oneself of what is clearly not the case (Redlawsk, Civettini and Emerson 2010). In such situations, selective attribution should be the preferred way of maintaining one’s priors.

Two case studies using the ANES data suggest that this is true. In 1988, the economy a month before the election was better than average, but only barely so. Democrats who wanted to believe that the Reagan economy was weak could probably do so with some ease. According to ANES data, in fact, many of them did: 41% of Democratic respondents said the growing economy was actually shrinking. Comparatively few Democrats (6%) answered that the economy was growing, but that Reagan was either not responsible for it or actively working against it. However, in 1992, the economy was well below average and the media consistently covered the Clinton-Bush election as one in which the incumbent presided over a weak economy. Given this, very few Republicans (8%) were willing to suggest the economy was actually getting better. Instead, a much larger share of Republicans (32%) claimed that the weakened economy was not the fault of Bush’s policies, or even that in fact his administration’s policies had staved off the worst case economic scenarios. If citizens were not engaging in selective attribution as well as selective perceptions, conflicted partisans among them in years like 1992 or 2008 would

be forced to begrudgingly admit that their team performed less than admirably on the economy, and some of these respondents would likely have changed their vote accordingly.

Experiment 2 above also provides evidence consistent with this account. In 2016 and 2017, the economy was unambiguously strong, suggesting that selective attribution would be used as a motivated reasoning strategy by outparty subjects at least as commonly as selective perception. Using the same data as before, I divide outgroup subjects into four groups using a 2x2 grid: those who perceive the economy as good (versus mediocre or worse), and those who perceive the president as primarily responsible for economic outcomes (versus equally or more attributable to other factors). Only 13% of outgroup subjects actually give the president credit for a strong economy (compared to 35% in the ingroup). On the other hand, 25% of outgroup subjects saw the president as responsible for a *bad* economy, while 32% saw the outparty president as getting lucky with a good economy. While 54% of outgroup subjects in total saw the economy as weak, selective attribution allowed an additional 32% of subjects to avoid giving credit to a president from the other party. It is worth noting that although selective attribution is used more commonly than selective perception, compared to the ANES respondents from decades earlier, many more respondents are still willing to engage in the latter, despite a clearly strong economy. This may be due to increased reliance upon partisan media for economic data. Alternatively, it could reflect growing economic inequality, as stagnant wages and a growing reliance on part-time work could make citizens more likely to see the economy as weak.

Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence I have presented suggests that retrospective economic voting is on the decline, and plays a significantly diminished role in presidential vote choice. This decline is consistent with the timing of the ramp up in political polarization in the 1980s, and continuing to the present. Polarization leads mass partisans to think of the other party in tribalistic, competitive terms, and in order to maintain beliefs about the outgroup's inability to successfully manage the national economy, they engage in selective perception of the state of the economy, and attribution of credit and blame for its highs and lows. Both of these tendencies matter, as selective perception allows them to dismiss outparty successes through the relatively cognitively effortless process of simple denial, while selective attribution provides them with alternative rationalization when the state of the economy is too good or bad to ignore.

A common response to findings of selective perception and/or selective attribution may be that the evaluations respondents make in surveys are reflective of partisan cheerleading, rather than sincere beliefs. However, given the diminishing linkage between economic conditions and actual votes, as demonstrated in the first section of this paper, it is increasingly difficult to think of economic misperception in surveys as mere partisan cheap talk. If conflicted partisans do privately perceive the economy as it truly is, but choose to hold their nose and vote with their party regardless, then retrospective voting is in just as much peril as if they sincerely believed their stated misperceptions. Rather than fooling themselves, they have simply decided to privilege party above performance, violating the central tenet of retrospective accountability.

These findings highlight the challenges that affective polarization poses for governance. In a polarized America, citizens will seemingly be willing to tolerate poor economic performance

from their own party, or fail to reward the other side for apparently good economic stewardship, winnowing further already weak hopes that the public will be responsive to government action. My argument should not be construed as meaning that voters can only provide responsible signals to their representatives by voting for the incumbent during good economic times, and the challenger during troubling ones. Indeed, there are plenty of political considerations of great import besides the state of the economy, and citizens can certainly be justified in voting against an apparently capable manager of the economy who does not share their values, represent their non-economic policy views, and so on. This is especially so given that the president has modest control over economic outcomes, and can often do little without the assent of other actors within and outside of the country.

Instead, the decline of retrospective voting matters to the extent that it provides elected officials with an incentive to deliver positive economic outcomes for the median voter. If politicians get the sense that voters are no longer paying attention to economic outcomes, or at least not in a way that will get them in trouble, then elites may feel more free to pursue their own goals or that of the wealthy or organized, whose preferred policies may be orthogonal or even detrimental to the public interest. Similarly, if politicians no longer feel they can win support from voters in the other party via economic achievement, they may instead prefer to enact policies that narrowly benefit members from their own base. Presently, the administration pursues a trade war that economists uniformly condemn and predict will result in the loss of tens to hundreds of thousands of jobs in the short-run; if and when these job losses come, will President Trump's voting base punish him for it, or will they assume there really were no job losses or, failing that, that the losses are simply due to bad luck, or even the other party?

This study highlights the importance of well-known psychology biases of attribution which political scientists have paid too little attention. Depending on the economic context, selective attribution appears to play just as much of a role as selective perception in weakening democratic accountability, but only the latter has been studied to any meaningful degree. I have argued in previous work that negative attributions about the other party do as well or better in explaining low outgroup affect than more common explanations, such as growing ideological extremity, and that voters tend to selectively credit or blame politicians for non-economic behavior as well (Freder 2018). The lack of attention to attribution despite its importance to outcomes in American politics makes studying it more difficult. In this paper, I am unable to track the change in selective attribution over several decades because attribution questions were rarely asked in the American National Election Study. I would call for future scholars to include attribution questions in future rounds of major time-series surveys, as well as in their own work.

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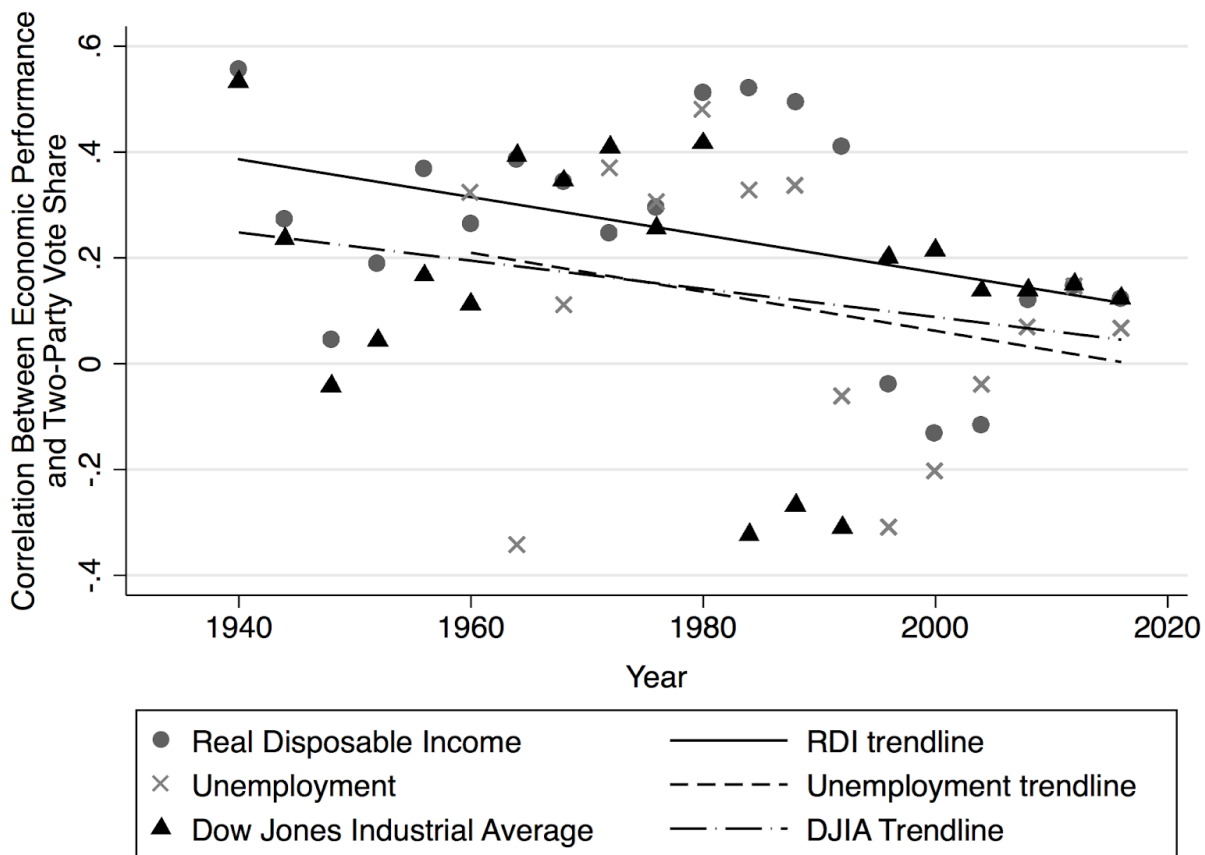
It's No Longer the Economy, Stupid: Supplemental Information

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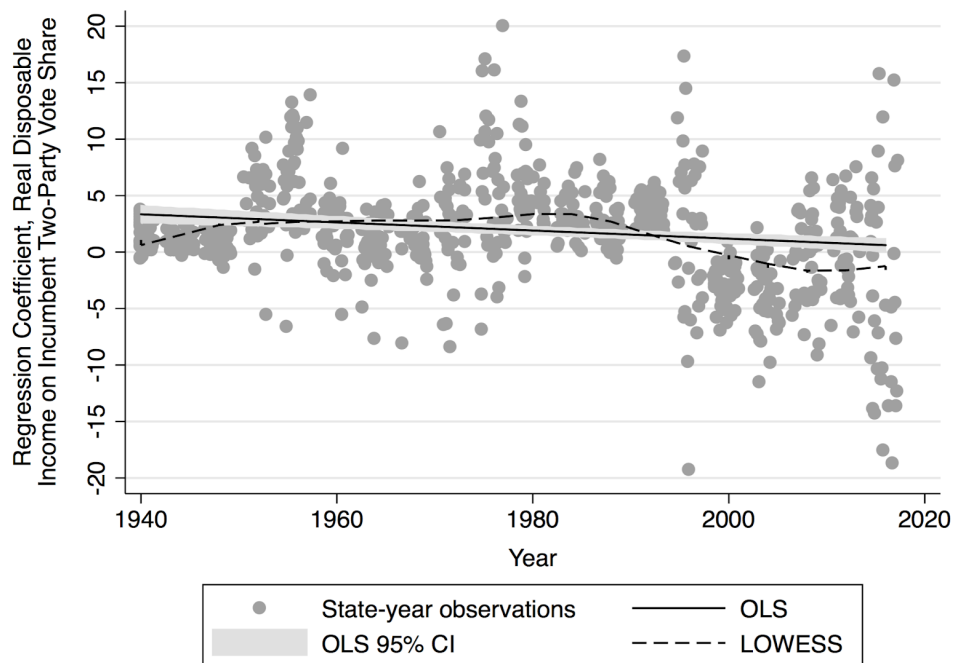
SI Section 1.1: Descriptions and Demographics of Referenced Studies and Data

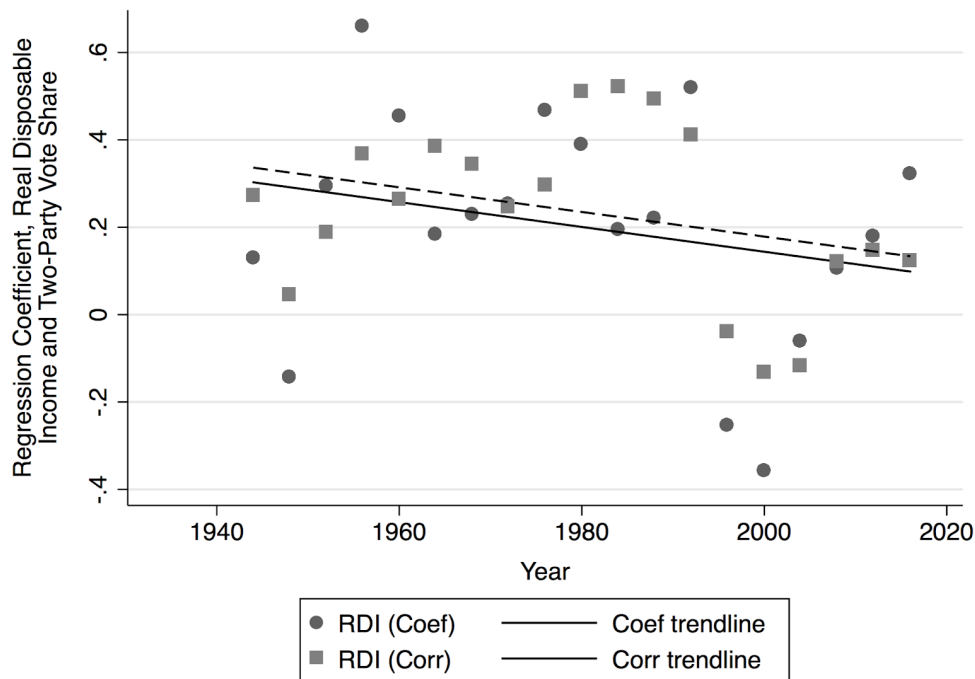
	County Vote Data	ANES Perception	GSS Perception	ANES Attribution	Experiment 1 (mTurk)	Experiment 2 (mTurk)
Timespan	1932-2016	1972-2016	1972-2016	1984-1996	2018	2018
Unit Type	County-Year	Individual	Individual	Individual	Individual	Individual
# Obs	71,784	27,875	57,706	3,365	254	853
% Under 35	--	33.21%	33.94%	36.37%	62.59%	60.44%
% College	--	39.94%	47%	45.32%	59.6%	59.89%
% Female	--	55.16%	55.88%	55.43%	46.37%	46.18%
% Democrat	--	52.69%	70%	49.13%	49.81%	50.78%
% Republican	--	35.45%	30%	39.06%	36.61%	36.23%

SI Section 2.1: Decline of Economic Voting Robustness Checks – Alternative Economic Markers



To eliminate the possibility that it is only the relationship between RDI and incumbent vote share that has changed, and not that of economic performance and vote share generally, in the figure above, I perform the same analysis on two other economic variables – the unemployment rate and the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Data comes from the Federal Reserve and Bureau of Labor Statistics. For these measures, as with RDI, I take the year to year difference from October of each year, using only national-level data. As the figure above shows, regardless of the measure used, the relationship over time is significantly negative.

SI Section 2.2: Decline of Economic Voting Robustness Checks – Correlation Coefficients



One problem with using correlations as the primary measure is that correlation measures are sensitive to variance, which could lead to a misinterpretation of the apparent over-time relationship. For instance, rather than a decline in the impact of economic performance on incumbent vote share, the negative relationship over time could instead be due to decreased variance in incumbent vote share across elections. To account for this, I rerun the analysis described in the paper, but using correlation coefficients from simple bivariate OLS regressions.

Using this new method, I still find similar negative over-time results for data taken by grouping county observations at the state level (top panel), as well as those from taking simple averages of all observations in each year (bottom panel). For clarity, the bottom panel shows the results using both correlation coefficients (solid) and correlations (dashed). The difference between the two is small and insignificant.

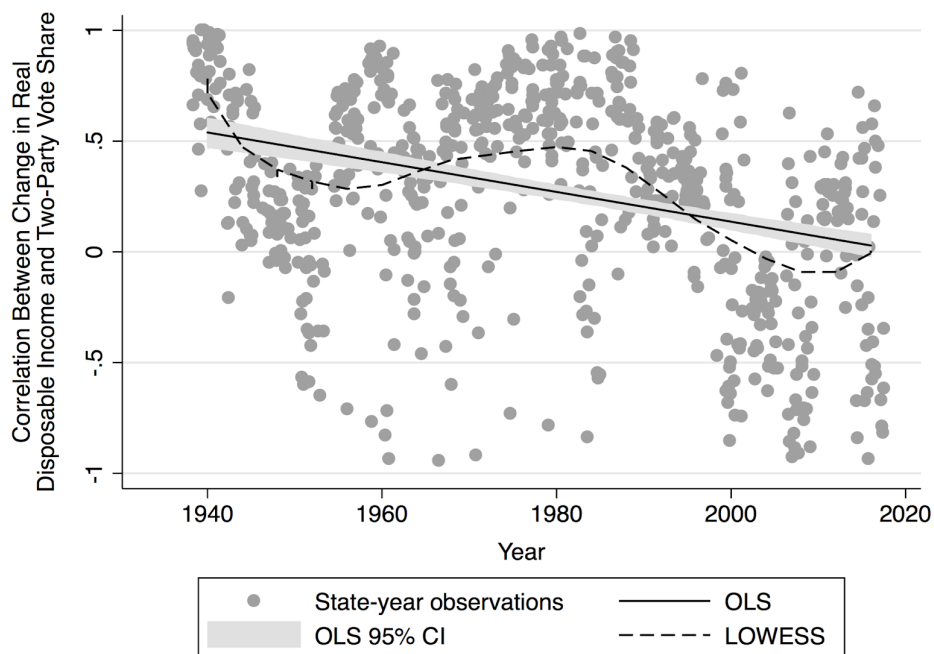
One observable difference between the results reported in the paper and those reported above is in the lower curve in the top panel. The former version shows a declining relationship from 1940-1960, while in this version the relationship is flat to increasing. Despite this difference, both versions show the result key to the argument in this paper, that from 1990-present, the relationship has significantly declined.

In addition to what is shown above, I also obtain correlation coefficients from a model that includes a term for lagged incumbent vote share, to allow for the possibility that the estimated effect of real disposable income on incumbent vote share is not picking up some other pro-incumbent bias that is growing over time. Specifically, this model includes the percentage incumbent vote share from the most recent presidential election prior to the one held in a given year. While this variable is often significant in

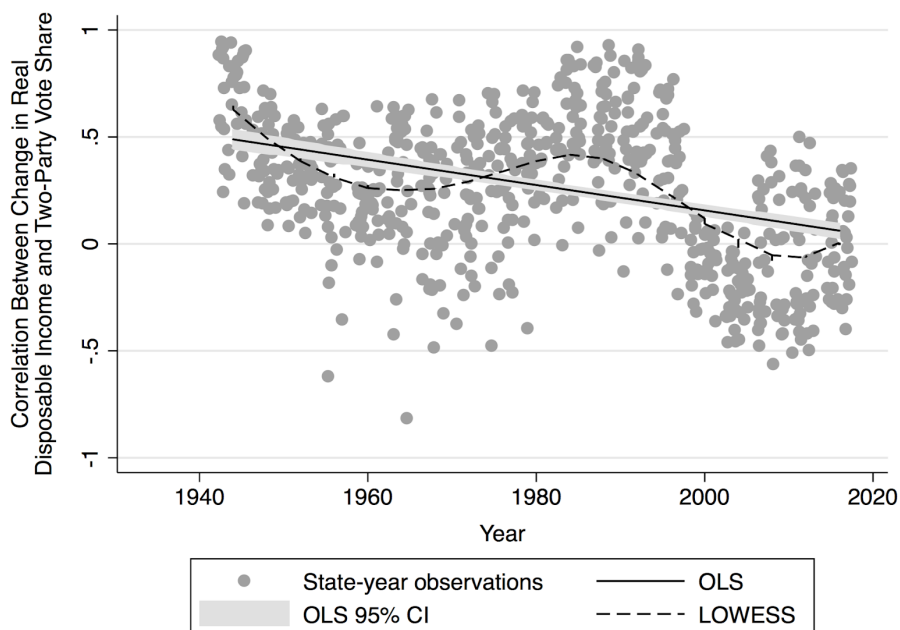
the model, its substantive impact on the correlation coefficients of interest are small and insignificant, and these estimates are not shown separately for this reason.

SI Section 2.3: Decline of Economic Voting Robustness Checks – Alternative Time Windows

Two-Election Windows



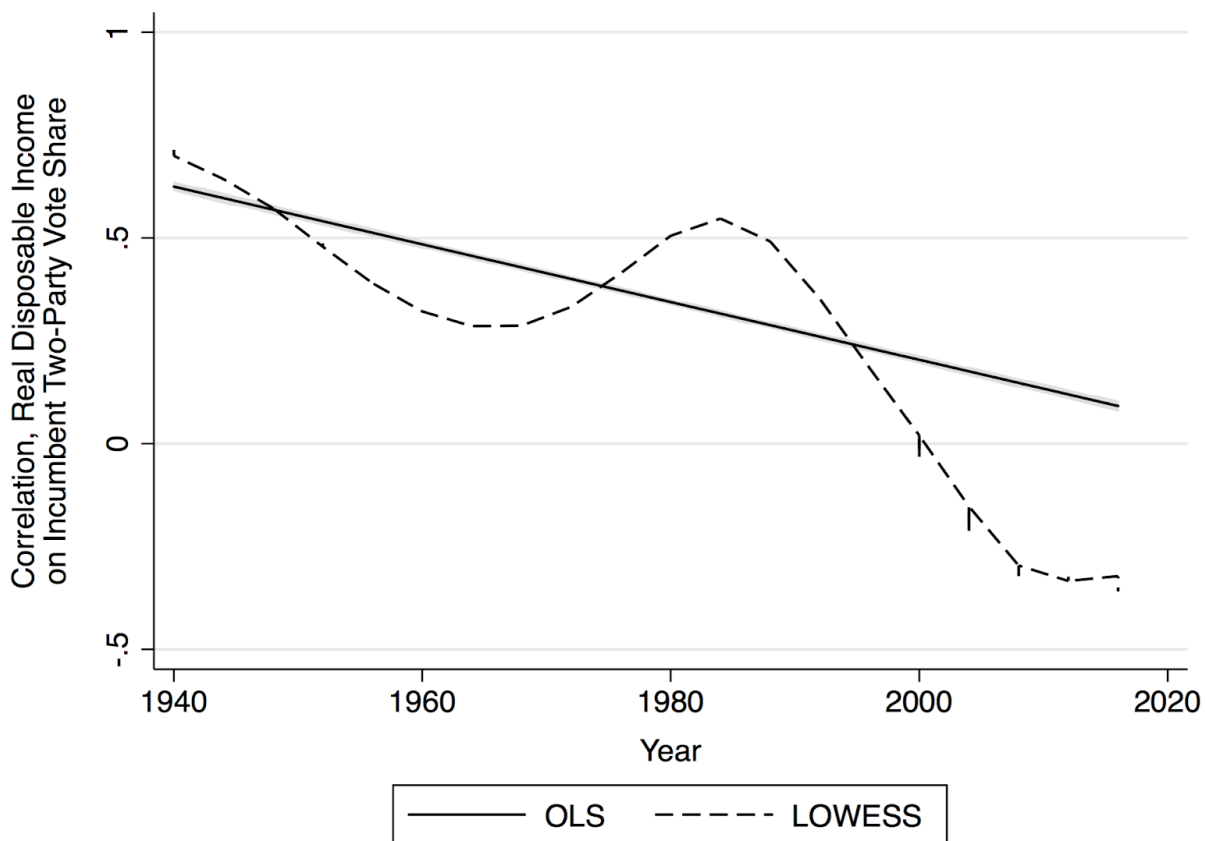
Four-Election Windows



In the main analysis in the paper, the correlations I used represent windows of three elections for each grouping of county level observations. For instance, in the paper, the dots in the figure above each represent the correlation between RDI and incumbent vote share for all counties within a state, over a period of three consecutive elections.

To demonstrate that my findings are not an artifact of the particular window of elections I chose to select, the above figures show the analysis from Figure 1 in the paper recreated using alternative specifications. The top panel uses two-election windows, while the bottom-panel shows the results from the use of four-election windows. It is easily seen that my findings are insensitive to changes in the window; both the line of best fit and lowess curve are similar regardless of specification. This is true as well for alternative measures of economic performance, but for the sake of brevity these results are not reproduced here.

SI Section 2.4: Decline of Economic Voting Robustness Checks – No State Grouping



Some scholars may be concerned that the strategy I used to group the Figure 1 plot by state compromised the results themselves. While I grouped by state only to produce a more easily readable plot, and the regression series shown in Table 1 should address these concerns, I produce above a plot similar to Figure 1, but that does not group counties by state. The above plot uses 58,200 county-level observations, each representing a rolling correlation (over three election years) of incumbent vote share and year-to-year change in real disposable income in the election year. To ensure results are not driven by counties dropping in or out of the analysis, I drop any county that lacks observations in one or more of the twenty two election years analyzed. The above figure shows both OLS and LOWESS results, but does not include a scatter plot, which would contain too many observations to be readable. The above results are effectively the same as those shown in Figure 1, as well as the other robustness checks.

SI Section 2.5: Increased Role of Partisanship in Economic Evaluations – Survey Weights and Sampling

Figure 2, with sample weights

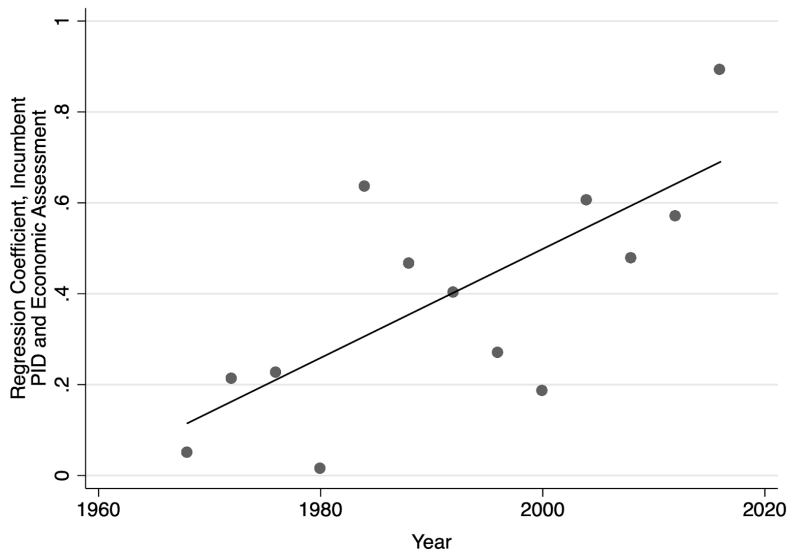
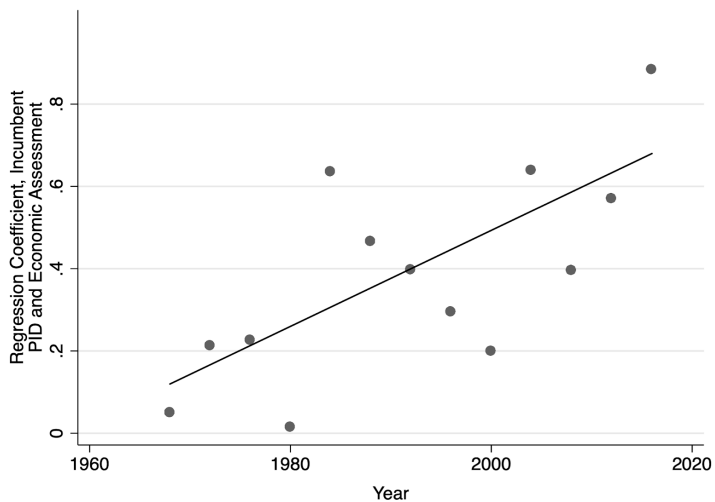


Figure 2, with face-to-face respondents removed



In the main paper, Figure 2 uses non-weighted ANES data, and includes face-to-face respondents in 2008 and after. To ensure that my findings are not the result of a weighting problem or the shift in sample makeup, I produce the above figures using weights and dropping FTF respondents, respectively.

SI Section 2.6: FiveThirtyEight Economic Index

FiveThirtyEight Economic Composite Index, 1968-2008

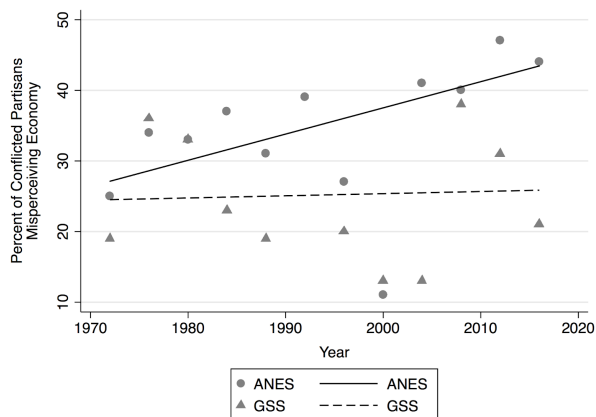
Days Until Election	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
250	3.0%	3.1%	1.9%	-0.6%	5.4%	3.0%	1.0%	3.2%	4.2%	3.3%	2.0%
225	3.1%	3.4%	2.5%	-2.5%	5.5%	2.8%	1.3%	3.1%	5.0%	3.3%	1.3%
200	4.2%	3.9%	2.6%	-2.9%	5.6%	2.8%	1.8%	3.0%	4.3%	3.6%	1.2%
175	4.3%	3.8%	3.5%	-3.6%	5.7%	2.7%	1.8%	2.9%	4.5%	3.4%	1.1%
150	4.5%	4.0%	3.6%	-4.0%	5.6%	3.1%	1.8%	3.0%	4.2%	3.6%	0.4%
125	3.7%	4.0%	3.9%	-4.7%	5.5%	3.5%	1.9%	2.8%	4.1%	3.6%	-0.3%
100	3.4%	4.2%	4.2%	-5.1%	5.1%	3.8%	1.8%	2.5%	3.8%	3.1%	-0.3%
80	3.3%	4.5%	4.1%	-5.3%	5.8%	3.7%	2.0%	2.9%	3.8%	2.6%	-0.9%
60	3.4%	4.4%	4.2%	-4.5%	5.5%	3.5%	2.0%	2.6%	3.5%	3.0%	-1.6%
45	3.3%	4.4%	4.2%	-2.5%	5.2%	3.6%	2.0%	3.0%	3.4%	3.1%	-1.5%
30	3.4%	4.5%	4.0%	-2.5%	4.9%	3.7%	1.6%	3.1%	3.2%	3.0%	-2.1%
20	3.3%	4.4%	3.9%	-2.3%	4.8%	3.7%	1.5%	3.1%	2.9%	2.9%	-2.7%
10	3.4%	4.6%	3.5%	-2.2%	4.9%	3.4%	1.6%	3.0%	3.0%	2.7%	-3.2%
0	3.3%	4.8%	3.7%	-2.2%	5.1%	3.3%	1.8%	3.0%	3.1%	2.8%	-2.6%

Reprinted above is FiveThirtyEight’s economic index, which I use in this paper as an objective measure of the state of the economy at a given point in time prior to the election. The index uses seven major economic indicators to produce a sense of the overall growth in the economy. A number lower than 3% with less than a month until the election is considered to be unusually bad by the developers of the index, and in the paper, I treat any such cases as a “bad economy”. This occurs in 1980, 1992, and 2008. For more information about how the index is computed, please visit

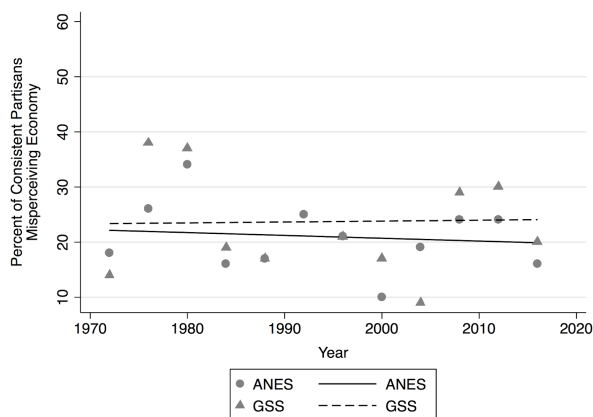
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/measuring-the-effect-of-the-economy-on-elections/>.

SI Section 2.7: Economic Misperception – Survey Weights and Sampling

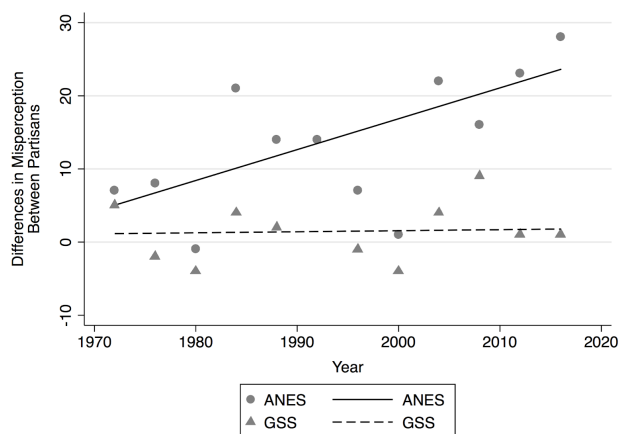
a) % among conflicted partisans



b) % among consistent partisans



c) difference between conflicted and consistent

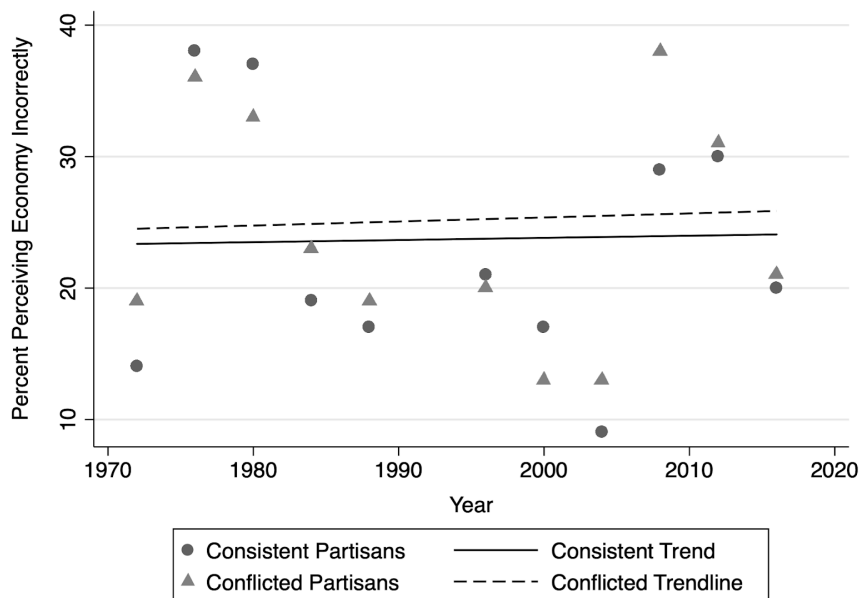


Note: N=27,875 for ANES respondents and N=57,706 for GSS respondents. Panel A shows results only for conflicted partisans, Panel B only for consistent partisans, and Panel C plots the difference between the observations in Panels A and B.

The above plots replicate Figure 3 from the paper, but the underlying analysis uses sample weights from ANES, and drops face-to-face respondents from 2008, 2012, and 2016. The results are essentially the same.

SI Section 2.8: Comparing the ANES and GSS over time

Economic Misperceptions Over Time (General Social Survey)



Note: N=57,706. 95% confidence intervals (not shown above) for each group always overlap.

The pattern of selective perception discussed in the paper does not replicate when looking at data from the GSS, which asks a nearly identical economic evaluation question as the ANES, reproduced below:

ANES Question [VCF0880]

1962-1998,2004: We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that (1962,1966-1974: you [and your family]; 1976 and later : you [and your family living here]) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?

2000-2002: Would you say that you (and your family) (2000 FACE-TO-FACE ONLY: living here) are better off, worse off, or just about the same financially as you were a year ago?

RESPONSE OPTIONS: Better Now; Same; Worse Now; DK/Uncertain/Depends

GSS Question ['finalter']

During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?

RESPONSE OPTIONS: Better; Stayed the Same; Worse; DK/No answer/NA

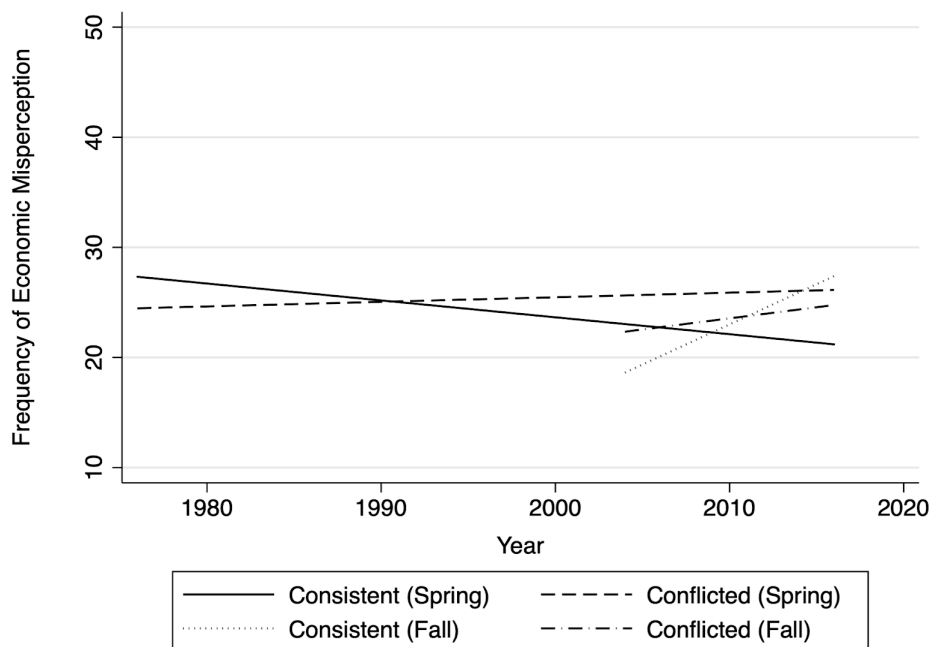
The figure above shows the results for the same test that produced Figure 3 in the paper, but using GSS data instead of ANES data. For the GSS, in which the vast majority of respondents are contacted in the spring, I use economic data taken from the FiveThirtyEight Index corresponding to five months prior to the election, rather than a month prior, as is contextually appropriate for the ANES. This, however, makes little difference, as in all but one election year, the state of the economy in the spring is more or less identical to the fall. See SI Section 2.6 for more details on timing and the economic index.

Despite the similarities between the two questions, the GSS shows no evidence of changes in how partisans perceive the economy. Across the entire period, neither conflicted nor consistent partisans exhibit high degrees of inaccuracy (the average is stable, though noisy, around 25% for both groups), and the trend is flat and identical for each.

What explains why these two surveys produce very different results? One possibility is timing – the GSS is fielded largely in the spring (80% of respondents contacted in the first half of the year), while the ANES pre-election interviews are fielded September through November, during the campaign season. Therefore, the difference may be due to the wide proliferation of general election campaign material that ANES subjects (but not GSS subjects) are exposed to, which pushes conflicted partisans towards inaccuracy. A second possibility is the context of the survey itself – the ANES is an explicitly political survey, while the GSS asks questions on a variety of social topics. As such, it may be that ANES respondents are inherently primed to think of themselves in a partisan manner in a way that GSS respondents are not.

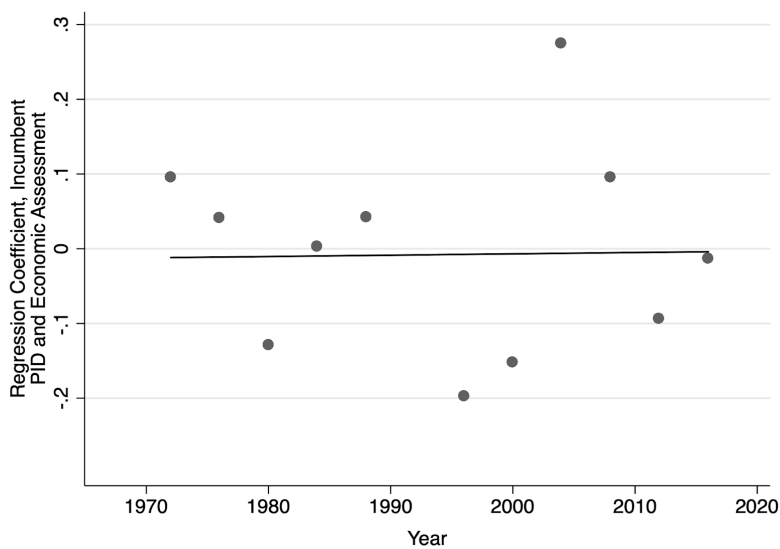
These possibilities are testable. If the first account is true, then the minority of GSS respondents who are surveyed June-November should exhibit greater inaccuracy than their earlier counterparts. If the second account is true, then for GSS respondents, the relationship between partisanship and economic evaluation should remain weak and flat over the entire period.

Testing the first of these accounts, I first find that GSS respondents do not appear to behave differently depending on when they are interviewed. The following figure plots both conflicted and consistent partisans on inaccurate perceptions over time, just as I did in paper Figure 3 and the figure above. Respondents in this figure, however, are further separated by their date of interview, with those being interviewed in May or earlier showing up as Spring respondents, and all others as Fall interviewees (the GSS did not interview any respondents in the fall prior to 2004). If the difference between the GSS and ANES were attributable to differences in timing, then we would expect to see conflicted partisans in the fall to be noticeably more inaccurate than both consistent fall partisans (who have no incentive to get it wrong) and conflicted spring partisans (who have not yet been exposed to campaign advertising). This does not appear to be the case – conflicted fall partisans appear to be no less accurate than the others.



Note: $N=22,931$.

On the other hand, testing the second account, I find that partisanship remains only a weak predictor of economic evaluations for GSS respondents across the entire period. The figure below shows Figure 2 from the paper, but replicated for the GSS. Instead of a fourfold increase in coefficient strength, the trend is flat at zero across time.



Note: $N=22,931$. Dots represent the coefficient across all respondents in each year.

The differences between the ANES and GSS samples cannot be explained by differences in timing; instead, it appears that respondents in the GSS do not feel increasing pressure to link their evaluations of the economy to their strength of partisanship. Given this, it seems likely that the findings differ across the two surveys because of the inherently political context of the ANES. Rather than calling into question the evidence for rise of selective perception, this arguably reinforces the finding – when partisan identities are activated, especially under increasingly high polarization contexts over time, citizens rush to defend their own team. Once removed from the explicit influence of partisanship, people evaluate the economy more fairly and accurately. Given that presidential voting occurs under an explicitly partisan context, and the evidence already presented shows actual economic conditions to have increasingly weak impact on voting decisions over time, scholars should consider the findings from the ANES, not the GSS, as representative of the actual calculus voters face when thinking about the economy.

SI Section 3.1: Question Wording, “Most Important Problem”, ANES

1960: What would you personally feel are the most important problems the government should try to take care of when the new President and Congress take office in January?

1964: As you well know, there are many serious problems in this country and in other parts of the world. The question is, what should be done about them and who should do it. We want to ask you about problems you think the government in Washington should do something about and any problems it should stay out of. First, what would you personally feel are the most important problems the government should try to take care of when the new President and Congress take office in January?

1966: What do you personally feel are the most important problems which the government in Washington should try to take care of?

1968,1980,1982: As you well know, the government faces many serious problems in this country and in other parts of the world. What do you personally feel are the most important problems which the government in Washington should try to take care of?

1970: As you well know, there are many serious problems in this country and in other parts of the world. We'd like to start out by talking with you about some of them. What do you personally feel are the most important problems which the government in Washington should try to take care of?

1972-1978,1984 AND LATER: What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?

(IF MORE THAN ONE PROBLEM:) Of all you've told me (1996-LATER: Of those you've mentioned), what would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?

This is an open-ended question, so responses are manually coded at a later time.

SI Section 3.2: Question Wording, “Government Handling of the Economy”, ANES**ANES Question [VCF9044a]**

1984 AND LATER: Over the past year, would you say that the economic policies of the federal government have made the nation's economy better, worse, or haven't they made much difference either way?

Response options: Better; Same (“haven’t made much difference”); Worse

SI Section 3.3: Question Wording, Experiment 1

Prompt (in-text choice is randomized):

According to economic data, between 1948-2005, on average, **real income growth** in [ELECTION YEARS if condition=democrat; NON-ELECTION YEARS if condition=republican] for lower, middle and upper-class Americans **was significantly higher under [DEMOCRATIC/REPUBLICAN] presidents than [REPUBLICANS/DEMOCRATS]**. (source: United States Census Bureau)

What do you think explains why [DEMOCRATIC/REPUBLICAN] presidents outperform [REPUBLICANS/DEMOCRATS] on this measure?

Response Options

For each reason listed below, please indicate how well it explains this finding:

1. [DEMOCRATIC/REPUBLICAN] policies are better at producing income growth.
2. [DEMOCRATS/REPUBLICANS] were lucky to serve more often when the economy was doing well for other reasons.

For each of the above, respondents answered using a 5 point scale, ranging from “Poor Explanation” to “Strong Explanation”

Disclosure at End of Survey

“DISCLOSURE: Earlier, you were shown a statement about economic performance under Democratic and Republican presidents. This finding comes from work by Larry Bartels in "Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age" (2008).

He found that:

- 1) Republican presidents presided over a stronger economy in **election years** relative to Democratic presidents, for all levels of income.
- 2) Democratic presidents presided over a stronger economy in **non-election years** relative to Republican presidents, for all levels of income.

Please click to the next page to finish the survey.”

SI Section 3.4: Question Wording, Experiment 2

Attribution Question

“Some people think politicians, such as President [OBAMA/TRUMP], have great control over the economy. Others think that the quality of the economy is largely determined by forces outside his control.

What do you think? **How much ability to affect the American economy [DID OBAMA / DOES TRUMP] actually have?**

The scale below ranges from high presidential control to low presidential control. Please use it to indicate your belief.”

Respondents are shown a 7 point scale, with the left pole labeled “Economy mostly determined by president” and the right pole “Economy mostly determined by outside forces and chance”. The midpoint was labeled “Even mixture of both”.

Economic Performance Question

“Think about the **performance of the economy** during [OBAMA’S LAST YEAR / TRUMP’S FIRST YEAR] in office (2016).

Regardless of your attitudes towards him personally, how would you rate the economy under [PRESIDENT OBAMA IN 2016 / PRESIDENT TRUMP IN 2017]?”

Respondents are then shown a 7 point scale with each point labeled, top to bottom, as follows: “excellent”, “very good”, “good”, “mediocre”, “bad”, “very bad”, “terrible”

SI Section 4.1: Order Effects, Experiment 2

		b	S.E.	N
Economic Evaluation First	Inparty	0.259***	0.094	214
	Outparty	-0.147**	0.069	225
Economic Evaluation Last	Inparty	0.216**	0.1	200
	Outparty	-0.196***	0.072	214

The above table shows the effects reported in Experiment 2 broken down by the order in which the two questions (quality of the economy under the randomized president, and the level of responsible attributed to the president for economic outcomes). Respondents were shown these questions in randomized order. Regardless of order, the relationship between responses to these questions are significant and in the correct direction: for outgroup respondents, an increased rating of the economy is associated with a lessened belief in the president's impact on the economy, while the opposite is true for ingroup respondents. Significance is reported above as ** when $p < 0.05$, and *** when $p < 0.01$.