



# Tea Party support and perceptions of local economic conditions



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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have long studied the underpinnings of voter perceptions of national economic conditions. Of growing interest though, is the effect of local economic evaluations on approval and voting behavior. Even though individuals engage more directly with the local economy than with that of the nation, perceptions of local conditions are colored as much by individual attitudes and demographics as by objective measures. Metropolitan area unemployment rates strongly predict local evaluations, but so do education, age, sex, and political attitudes. Of particular interest, even controlling for objective conditions, support for the Tea Party strongly predicts more negative evaluations and overpowers most other sources of bias.

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## 1. Introduction

In surveys, respondents are often asked about their personal financial circumstances and their perceptions of the national economy. To the individual in question, the former are readily observable. Respondents know their employment status and whether it has improved or worsened in recent history. They tend to also be at least generally aware of their savings and level of debt.

Respondent familiarity with the latter is less clear. Media coverage does report national level indicators and popular discourse can suggest that times are good or ill. However, respondents tend not to have personal experience with the national economy. Industries, like populations, are not spread uniformly throughout a country and do not grow at a uniform rate. As such, economic conditions can vary substantially within a country and even within a state or province.

Many, if not most workers are geographically constrained to seeking employment within a certain radius of their current residence. Similarly, while individuals are technically free to move and resettle within a country, their actual mobility is more limited. Given that a person tends to live and work within only a relatively small area, the economic conditions in this area will be more relevant to her than those of the macro (national or state) economy.

Economic evaluations have long been theorized to affect voter behavior and approval of leadership. However traditionally, these theories have considered only personal economic conditions

(Fiorina, 1978; Grafstein, 2005) and/or national level conditions (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1984; Lewis-Beck and Tien, 1996; Wlezien and Erikson, 1996). Only recently have researchers begun to examine the effect of local conditions on voting and approval behavior (Rogers, 2014; Rogers and Tyszler, 2012). In particular, Rogers (2014) finds evidence that both objective- and perceptions of local conditions affect approval of state and federal officials.

What then affects whether an individual perceives her local economy to be in a good or poor condition? The answer depends on both objective local conditions and characteristics of the individual. Specifically, evaluations are strongly correlated with the local unemployment rate and with the individual's attitudes toward the Tea Party movement. Local unemployment and affinity toward the Tea Party however, are entirely independent. As an objective measure of local conditions, it is reasonable that people who live in areas with higher unemployment would think that the economy is bad. Tea Party support however, is more than a reflection of local conditions, party identification, and ideology. It is a measure of frustration, policy or otherwise. Its effect is so strong that it overwhelms most other traditional sources of bias, like partisanship, ideology, and personally being unemployed. In the following sections, I will first lay out a theory of the contextual and attitudinal underpinnings of economic evaluations. I will then combine objective local measures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the American Community Survey with responses to a unique item in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to examine individual evaluations of local economic conditions. I will conclude with a discussion of why this Tea Party effect is so strong and why,

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even where unemployment is low, Tea Party supporters believe that the economy is bad.

## 2. Local economic conditions: literature and theory

A plethora of studies examine the links between local unemployment rates and everything from health outcomes (Osler et al. 2003) and use of services (Wong et al., 2014) to community college enrollments (Hillman and Orians 2013). Black et al. (2002) demonstrate that in weak labor markets, disability program participation rises. If local conditions have direct effects on the lives of individuals in those communities, then logic suggests that they will affect political attitudes as well. Johnston et al. (2000) for instance find that increases in local unemployment decrease the likelihood that a voter believes the government has delivered national prosperity. This, in turn, reduces the respondent's likelihood of voting to keep the incumbent government. Both objective and perceived local economic conditions affect approval of federal officials (Rogers, 2014).

However, the causal arrow may point in the other direction. Evans and Andersen (2006) find that (lagged) support for the incumbent party predicts higher sociotropic evaluations, rather than the reverse. Personal experiences, more than personal circumstances, also affect sociotropic evaluations. Ansolabehere, et al. (2014) posit that voter assessments of the macro-economy are colored by the economic conditions experienced by their peers, while Weatherford (1983) finds that individuals place their own experiences in the context of those of close acquaintances. Finally, it has also been found that objective local conditions affect national level evaluations (Reeves and Gimpel, 2012).

In mayoral elections Holbrook and Weinschenk, (2014) find some evidence of an effect of local unemployment rates, but that this effect disappears, when controls for challenger spending are included. Books and Prysby (1999) find that state unemployment rates affect national level evaluations, but that local unemployment does not have the same effect. This is somewhat encouraging, as it suggests that respondents at least implicitly distinguish conditions in their community from those of the nation at large. Niemi, et al. (1999) go further, arguing that perceptions of the state and national economy are indeed distinct. In particular, they find that state level evaluations are strongly predicted by appropriate objective indicators.

However, voters also recognize the differential powers of federal and state government. Peltzman (1987) argues that voters behave as if national level policies have a greater impact on their personal circumstances than those at the state level. In the US Context, this is reasonable, given the more powerful economic tools available to the federal government. Again looking at differences between levels, subjective evaluations of personal and national economic conditions have also been used to predict support for integration into the European Union (Gabel and Whitten, 1997).

With the exception of Niemi et al. (1999) though, there are few analyses of perceptions of economic conditions between the personal and national levels. To be fair, a number of studies use perceptions of state economic conditions to predict gubernatorial voting (Clark et al., 1985; Atkeson and Partin, 1995). However, these studies use assessments of the state economy as an explanatory variable, without examining its underpinnings. Newman et al. (2014) approach a related question by asking respondents how

easy it is to find jobs in their community. They find that an increase in the unemployment rate in the respondent's zip code increases the likelihood that the respondent will say that jobs are difficult to find. The authors find only a weak effect, when unemployment is measured at the county level.<sup>1</sup>

Keeping in mind the lessons of Niemi et al. (1999), Newman et al. (2014), and Evans and Andersen (2006), two sets of factors should predict evaluations of the local economy: objective conditions and political attitudes. By way of the former, voters tend to be ill informed about objective economic conditions (Conover et al., 1986). However, some information is readily available to them, such as if friends or neighbors have lost their jobs, or if a major new employer just opened a facility. This information is essentially free, as it may be the topic of casual conversation. Even if a person cannot accurately report the current values of economic indicators, she is still likely to know whether times are good or bad. By simple mathematics, all else being equal, a respondent in a community with 15% unemployment is more likely to have unemployed friends and neighbors than a respondent in a community with 5% unemployment.

However, people are not neutral processors of information, but are rather predisposed to give biased evaluations of the economy, based on a variety of factors. For one, consider ideology. Suppose that the incumbent president (or governor) is of the opposite party as the respondent. Because the respondent is displeased that the opposition is in power, she may report that things are going poorly, even if her community is objectively doing well. Out of motivated reasoning (Lebo and Cassino, 2007), she gives a lower evaluation of the economy to justify her displeasure with the opposition party. It is not actually her ideology that is causing the lower evaluation, nor is it the distance between her policy preferences and those of the president, but her more general frustration with the government. If this is the case, then it is important to measure frustration separately from party identification and ideology.

The 2010 US midterm elections were interesting, in part because of the rise of the Tea Party movement. While the Tea Party label was later co-opted by the Republican party and in the 2010 elections Tea Party advocates largely attacked Democratic candidates, in its early days it was more of an expression of frustration at government inefficiency. Aldrich et al. (2014) find that a large number of voters blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the country's problems. These voters just happened to vote more heavily Republican in this election, perhaps because the Democrats were presiding over a unified government. What makes this interesting is that affiliation with the Tea Party (in those early days any way) was as much an emotional act as a political one. Voters who identified with the Tea party did so out of anger and frustration rather than to advocate for a specific set of policies.

There is limited evidence that Tea Party support is connected to objective local conditions. Tope et al. (2015) provide evidence that respondents who live in counties that had unemployment increase between 2000 and 2009 are more likely to be members of the Tea Party. In contrast, McVeigh et al. (2014) find no connection between county unemployment and number of Tea Party organizations nor between personal unemployment and support for the Tea Party. They instead find that support is highest in counties with a high level of educational segregation. Maxwell and Parent, (2013) even report a lower unemployment rate among Tea Party supporters than among opponents and reaffirm their claim that support is not just on policy grounds, but out of personal opposition to President Obama (Maxwell and Parent 2012).<sup>2</sup> Parker and Barreto (2013) go

<sup>1</sup> A possible explanation is that there is a six year gap between when the authors measured unemployment (the 2000 American Community Survey) and when they ran their survey (2006). Presumably a region could have seen both sides of the business cycle in that time.

<sup>2</sup> The latter study however also finds a weak positive effect of being unemployed on likelihood of being a Tea Party member.

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