



Clarity of responsibility and economic evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Convincing scholarly evidence shows the economy directs the mass public's support for parties and leaders. But the extent of economic voting depends on a country's "clarity of responsibility." According to several scholars, political clarity is important because it determines whether people link national economic performance to the parties in government. This study explores a potential second role, which involves how clarity moderates the strength of partisan-motivated reasoning. Clarity of responsibility makes the economy more or less central to party politics. It could therefore moderate people's motivation to rationalize economic facts in a biased direction. Using cross-national survey data, this study tests this possibility by examining economic disagreement between people who support a party in government and those who support the opposition. Results from a Bayesian multilevel regression show that partisan disagreement varies systematically with clarity of responsibility. This finding raises new questions about cross-national differences in economic voting.

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Cross-national research produces convincing evidence that economic conditions direct the electorate's support for parties and leaders (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Hibbs, 2006). Economic voting occurs because the mass public interprets and acts on information about the political economy "appropriately" (Clarke and Stewart, 1996, 191). But different governing systems send different performance signals: in some countries responsibility for economic policy is clear, while in others it is murky. One consequence of this variation in "clarity of responsibility" is that the degree of economic voting varies cross-nationally (Powell and Whitten, 1993).¹

Researchers have focused on the finding that clear responsibility strengthens the association between the macroeconomy and election outcomes (e.g., Whitten and Palmer, 1999; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). In most

studies, thus, scholars view political clarity as an accountability mechanism. There is a second way clarity conditions could matter, however, which has implications for the prevailing understanding. In short, political clarity could affect people's tendency to engage in partisan-motivated economic reasoning.

Numerous studies indicate that party identifiers perceive economic conditions in the way that benefits their party politically (e.g., Palmer and Duch, 2001; Bartels, 2002; Lebo and Cassino, 2007). This study proposes that motivated partisans face different incentives in countries with different political clarity. In a country with clear responsibility, the economy's status is central to evaluating government performance. This creates an incentive for government and opposition supporters to rationalize economic facts in a partisan direction. In a country with unclear responsibility, in contrast, "blurring conditions" obscure the link between economics and government performance. In this setting, party identifiers have no incentive to engage in factual rationalizations.

This study's general claim is that clarity of responsibility structures how people learn about economic conditions.

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¹ Supporting information and analysis is provided in the [Supplementary Materials](http://www.polisci.tamu.edu/faculty/whitten) for this volume located at <http://www.polisci.tamu.edu/faculty/whitten> (click on "Supplementary Materials for 'Clarity of Responsibility and Economic Evaluations'").

Across the scale of responsibility, different implications for government performance imply different degrees of biased reasoning. Testing this possibility requires a research design that can compare motivated reasoning's consequences cross-nationally. This study examines country-level opinion differences between people who support the government and those who support the opposition. Employing national survey data and a Bayesian multilevel regression, I first analyze the individual and contextual determinants of mass economic evaluations. Then, using the model's multilevel properties, I explore the pattern of partisan economic disagreement cross-nationally.

The results show economic disagreement is substantially larger in countries with high political clarity. In clear systems, party identifiers have an incentive to engage in directional economic reasoning. This finding has implications for the wisdom that the economy plays a bigger electoral role in countries with minimal blurring (e.g., [Duch and Stevenson, 2008](#)). It suggests economic beliefs disproportionately align with votes in high-clarity countries for two reasons – not only genuine economic response, but also partisan-motivated reasoning. And thus, the cross-level interaction between partisan reasoning and political clarity likely exaggerates the high- versus low-clarity gap in economic voting.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: First, I sketch a theory about how clarity conditions affect the information processes that underlie economic evaluations. The second section details the study's data and statistical model. In section three I report the results of the multilevel regression. The final section considers the study's implications for economic voting and mass behavior.

1. Theory and hypotheses

This study's organizing idea is that psychological attachments to a party have an exogenous influence on policy evaluations. Despite cross-national differences in party systems, a group attachment is a fundamental shaper of behavior, and thus is likely to be cross-cutting.² In a broad sense, party attachments motivate people to affirm their affiliation. In the domain of economic learning, these attachments compel people to seek beliefs that portray their party's political abilities favorably. In particular, people who identify with the in-party seek the belief that the economy is in good shape, and those who identify with the out-party seek the belief that it is not.

Party identifiers can easily maintain such beliefs when actual-world economic conditions align with a “preferred-

world” state. When actual and preferred-world states are inconsistent, however, partisans can maintain these beliefs by rationalizing facts in a preferred direction ([Gaines et al., 2007](#)). For example, various party supporters might perceive an unemployment increase of 1% accurately. But because this fact concerns the governing party's economic management, in-party supporters will rationalize the change as a “modest rise,” while out-party supporters interpret it as “very large.” At the group level, these rationalizations produce lasting disagreement about the larger economy ([Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2008](#); [Tilley and Hobolt, 2011](#)).

Students of public opinion typically view partisan reasoning as an individual-level phenomenon (but see [Jerit and Barabas, 2012](#)). This study raises the possibility that partisan information processes are moderated by the political context, specifically political clarity. In general, the clarity of responsibility concept captures institutional features that determine the government's accountability to the mass public (e.g., [Whitten and Palmer, 1999](#); [Tavits, 2007](#)). In this study, these institutions are presumed to structure people's thinking about policy outcomes.

In high-clarity systems people are accustomed to linking policy programs with specific parties and leaders. In such a context, therefore, policy-relevant facts are bound tightly to people's party identities. In terms of judging the economy's health, the implication is that partisans in a high-clarity setting will be especially motivated to engage in partisan-directed factual rationalization. This logic undergirds this study's first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Clear responsibility for the economy will generate substantial partisan rationalization of economic facts, and relatively large group disagreement about the state of the economy in turn.

People in low-clarity political systems lack an institutionalized basis for attributing reward or blame. Blurring conditions create uncertainty about who is responsible, which means party identities are not directly implicated by the macro-economy's standing. Therefore, blurring conditions reduce incentives to engage in partisan-motivated reasoning. This suggests a second study hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Unclear responsibility for the economy will generate minimal partisan rationalization of economic facts, and relatively small group disagreement about the state of the economy in turn.

These hypotheses assume a party attachment has similar psychological properties across countries. Although one might reasonably wonder about this assumption, there is evidence that party attachments are durable in high- and low-clarity countries ([Schickler and Green, 1997](#)). In addition, as detailed in the supplementary materials, the balance of people who say they are “close” versus “not close” to a particular party is relatively even between high- and low-clarity countries. It thus seems justifiable to compare the influence of party attachments across the scale of responsibility.

2. Data and methods

Testing [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 2](#) requires cross-national public opinion data about mass economic

² To be sure, this view of partisanship's political significance is rooted in American mass behavior research ([Campbell et al., 1960](#)). Even so, scholars have successfully applied it in several western democracies (e.g., [Evans and Andersen, 2006](#); [Tilley and Hobolt, 2011](#)). Lasting attachments to particular parties exist in numerous countries ([Schickler and Green, 1997](#)) for good reason: differences in party control of government translate into differences in policy outcomes (e.g., [Hibbs, 1994](#)). To be sure, people who maintain a relatively weak or non-attachment to a party likely treat partisanship more like a performance tally. These are the people driving macro-level economic voting (e.g., [Fiorina, 1981](#); [Achen, 1992](#); [Clarke and Stewart, 1995](#); [Sanders et al., 2011](#)), but importantly, they are not the group of central interest in this study.

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