

Response Order, Party Choice, and Evaluations of the National Economy: A Survey Experiment

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We present the results of a survey experiment in which we manipulate the order that respondents are administered vote choice and economic evaluation items. Our findings add to the growing body of evidence which suggests that survey respondents tacitly align evaluations of the national economy with previously stated attitudes and behaviour. Our results have implications for theories of economic voting and for the design of national election study questionnaires.

Keywords: economic perceptions, party preference, endogenous

Introduction

Politicians, political commentators, and academic researchers have long taken it as axiomatic that party support in democratic systems is driven, to a large extent, by the performance of the national economy. Voters, it is proposed, reward incumbent governments for sound economic stewardship with continued support at the ballot box. By the same token, citizens punish poor economic performance in office by throwing out incumbents and electing opposition parties in their stead (Nannestad and Paldam 1995; Anderson 1995; Tuftes 1978). Not only does this 'reward-punish' model accord with basic notions of democratic accountability, it also has strong intuitive appeal; election campaigns invariably focus heavily on questions of economic (mis)management and popular historical accounts of changing electoral fortunes often point to the economy as a key explanatory factor. In recent times, for example, the British Conservative party's protracted slide into electoral unpopularity during the 1990s is generally accredited to Britain's forced exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and the upward pressure this placed on domestic interest rates (Sanders 1995). Similarly, Bill Clinton's successful campaign for the US presidency in 1992 famously ran to chief strategist James Carville's imperative, "it's the economy stupid!".

Early empirical investigations generally supported the commonsense notion of the economy as driver of electoral outcomes. Using econometric time series analysis, researchers showed that government popularity and vote choice could be reliably predicted by prior movements in objective macro-economic indicators (Goodhart and Bhansali 1970; Hibbing and Alford 1982) and by subjective eval-

uations of economic performance (Sanders 2000; Norpoth 1985). Approaches using cross-sectional survey data also appeared to confirm, for the most part, the idea that government popularity and vote choice vary as a function of the economic assessments of individual voters (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) for a review).

However, while this body of research appears to show that the economy influences a variety of political outcomes, it has ultimately raised more questions than it has answered: which aspects of the economy are important and which not?; do citizens place greater weight on their own financial situation (pocketbook voting), or on the performance of the national economy (sociotropic voting)?; do voters punish/reward incumbents for previous economic performance, or do they make their minds up on the basis of expectations of good or bad times in the future? Indeed, despite the voluminous body of research appearing to show that the economy has some effect, the study of economic voting can, perhaps, be best characterised by the inconsistent and contingent nature of its evidence base. As Anderson puts it, "Empirical findings accumulated in recent years strongly suggest that the influence of the economy on government popularity and election outcomes is far from inevitable" (Anderson 2007:272).

The primary reason for the contingent nature of economic voting relates to the clarity with which individual voters are able to evaluate economic performance and then attribute credit or blame to incumbents (McDonald and Budge 2005). Partly, this comes down to the nature of political institutions and electoral systems (Powell and Whitten 1993). For instance, it is difficult for voters who find themselves governed by a multi-party coalition, with an independent central bank setting interest rates, to clearly determine which political actors, if any, are responsible for change in economic indicators.

Additionally, however, there are clear psychological limitations to rational-choice explanations of economic voting. Acquiring information about the economy is costly for the

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individual citizen, while the probability that his or her vote will materially influence the election outcome is vanishingly small (Downs 1957; Key 1966). Citizens, therefore, have little if any incentive to become knowledgeable about the performance of the macro-economy. Given that it is rare to find consensus amongst economists on the state of the national economy, how do individual voters go about making up their minds?

Two primary explanations have been proposed in this regard, neither of them having favourable implications for theories of economic voting. First, scholars have argued that voters evaluate the economy through the filter of party loyalty; when asked to evaluate how the economy has been getting on in the past year, respondents provide what is essentially an expression of partisan loyalty, rather than an accurate assessment of the true state of the national economy (Evans and Andersen 2006; MacDonald and Heath 1997). Thus, supporters of the incumbent party provide favourable evaluations, while opponents do the opposite. Crucially, here, the causal arrow is reversed; economic evaluations become the *result*, not the cause of vote choice. Others have drawn on psychological theories of cognitive consistency (Festinger 1957; Bem 1972) to argue that respondents are driven, by mechanisms of dissonance reduction, to bring current economic evaluations in line with previously stated attitudes and behaviour (Wilcox and Wlezien 1996). Respondents seek to minimize the psychological tension induced by apparent inconsistency between cognitions and behaviour via some form of post-hoc realignment, "I voted for the government, so the economy must be doing okay".

Though these are complementary rather than competing explanations, accounts focusing on cognitive consistency have stronger implications for survey design. If respondents strive to align economic evaluations with previously stated attitudes and behaviour, then placing questions addressing vote choice and partisan loyalty *prior* to those eliciting economic evaluations may serve to heighten the endogeneity of economic perceptions to party preference (Sears and Lau 1983). If this is the case, the standard design of election study questionnaires may serve to artificially inflate the apparent influence of the economy on electoral outcomes. For instance, the first and second rounds of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) which were implemented in over 40 different countries, placed the vote choice prior to the economic evaluation questions.

Empirical investigations that have examined the effect of political variables on economic evaluations, though comparatively rare in the economic voting literature, have generally supported the endogeneity hypothesis. Wlezien, Franklin and Twigg (1997) use an instrumental variables (IV)¹ approach to show that both retrospective and prospective sociotropic evaluations are conditioned by vote intention. Using panel data, Evans and Andersen (2006) and Anderson et al. (2004) also conclude that economic evaluations are endogenous to previous party preferences (though see Lewis-Beck (2006) for an alternative view). While superior to cross-sectional analyses, both IV and panel data models have limitations in disentangling reciprocal effects. Using a sur-

vey experimental design, in which the order of party choice and economic perception variables is randomised across conditions, Wilcox and Wlezien (1996) find evidence of endogeneity on a sample of U.S. college students using a self-completion questionnaire. Similarly, Palmer and Duch (2000) find experimental effects of priming economic evaluations with party preference a year in advance of the 1998 Hungarian National Assembly elections, though significant interaction effects were observed only for the 'pocketbook' items.

In this short note, we add to the growing body of evidence which calls into question the exogeneity of economic perceptions as predictors of vote choice. We report the results of a survey experiment in which we manipulate the order that respondents to a general population survey in Great Britain are administered vote choice and economic evaluation items. Our first experimental hypothesis can be stated as follows:

H1 Evaluations of the macro-economy, both prospective and retrospective, will be more positive for Labour voters and more negative for Conservative voters when the party choice question precedes the economic evaluation items, than when this order is reversed.

Because prospective evaluations are unconstrained by historical record, they should be particularly susceptible to the biasing influence of party affiliation (Haller and Norpoth 1994; Palmer and Duch 2000). Our second hypothesis is therefore (conditional on H1):

H2 The priming effect of question order on economic evaluations will be greater for prospective than retrospective evaluations.

Data and Research Design

Our data for this experiment come from a telephone survey conducted in Great Britain immediately following the 2005 General Election. Respondents were interviewed via computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) between the 6th and 29th of May 2005, as part of the BMRB weekly omnibus survey (<http://www.bmrb.co.uk/>). The sample design is not random but places quota controls to match the sample to UK population marginals of age, sex and social class.² In total, 1892 complete interviews were achieved. BMRB do not keep a record of refusal information on the omnibus survey, so it is not possible to report the AAPOR refusal rate.

Respondents were randomly allocated to one of two conditions. In each condition, respondents were administered the same set of questions eliciting vote choice in the general

¹ IV estimation is broadly equivalent to 2-stage least squares. If model assumptions are not violated, these procedures yield unbiased estimates of reciprocal effects using cross-sectional data (see Wooldridge 2002 for a thorough treatment).

² As measured by the Social Grade classification (Market Research Society 2003).

Table 1: Logit regression of vote choice on question order

Independent Variables	Retrospective Logit (S.E.)	Prospective Logit (S.E.)
Order (1= vote question first)	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.29 (0.24)
Vote (1= Labour)	1.32 (0.18)***	1.56 (0.22)***
Order*Vote	0.54 (0.25)*	0.51 (0.30)*
Nagelkerke R^2	.18	.22
n	707	691

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed)

election of 5 May 2005, their perceptions of the performance of the national economy over the previous 12 months, and their expectations of the performance of the national economy over the coming 12 months. In condition 1 the vote choice questions preceded the economic evaluation items, in condition 2 the order was reversed. Full question wordings are provided in the appendix.

Results

We test our experimental hypothesis by estimating ordered logit models, in which economic evaluations are predicted as a function of experimental condition, vote choice and the interaction of these 2 binary variables. Because respondents are randomly assigned to the 2 treatment groups, there is no need to include additional covariates in the model. We use an ordered logit specification due to the ordinal nature of the economic evaluation variables. We focus our analysis only on respondents who reported voting for either of the two main parties (Labour and Conservative), with non-voters and those voting for other parties dropped from the analysis. This is because our experimental hypothesis makes no clear predictions about the effect of priming party choice on economic evaluations for non-voters, while the anticipated effects for those voting for other parties are problematised by the high prevalence of tactical voting under the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system.³

Preliminary analyses indicated that the parallel lines test of the proportional odds assumption was rejected ($p < 0.05$) for both retrospective and prospective evaluations, meaning the estimated model coefficients were not equal across the 5 levels of the dependent variables. We therefore collapsed the coding of the economic perception variables to 3 levels: *get/got worse*, *stay/stayed the same*, and *get/got better*, which yielded non-significant parallel lines tests. Model coefficients are presented in Table 1. Because we have an *a priori* experimental hypothesis and a comparatively low sample size, we use one-tailed tests of significance (Fowler 2004).

For both retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, the main effect of the order in which the questions is asked is non-significant. This is as should be expected under H1, because Conservative voters' evaluations become less favourable, while Labour voters' evaluations become more favourable, cancelling each other out in the aggregate. The main effect of vote choice is significant and in the expected

direction for both outcomes; Labour voters are more sanguine about the economic record of the Labour government in the final year of the 2001-2005 parliament and more optimistic about the economic prospects for the year ahead. The interaction terms (order*vote) are also positive and significant in both models, confirming our first experimental hypothesis (H1) that priming respondents with a party affiliation question brings the distribution of responses to subsequent economic evaluation items closer in line with reported vote choice. By raising the salience of party support prior to administering the economic evaluation items, respondents tacitly align their evaluations of the economy - both retrospective and prospective - with the party from whom they report having voted.

This effect can be seen more clearly in Figure 1, which plots the difference in the predicted probabilities of each response alternative for the retrospective evaluation question across experimental groups, as a function of party support. So, for instance, respondents who reported voting Conservative - and were asked their vote choice prior to economic evaluations - had an 8% higher probability of selecting a 'got worse' response alternative than Conservative voters who received the economic evaluation items first. Similarly, amongst Labour supporters, those who were first administered the party support question had a 5% higher probability of selecting a 'got better' response alternative than those who received the economic evaluation items first.

A near-identical pattern is observed for the prospective evaluation question, meaning our second hypothesis (H2) is not supported; the effect of priming vote choice is no greater for prospective than for retrospective evaluations of the economy. While Conservative voters receiving the vote choice question first had a 7% higher probability of selecting a 'get worse' response option, for Labour voters the opposite was the case; they had a 4% lower probability of selecting a 'get worse' alternative but a 5% higher probability of stating that they thought the economy would 'get better'.

Discussion

It is common for election surveys to place economic evaluation items after questions about vote choice and party identification. This has certainly been the case for the last three British election studies, which is the particular electoral context on which we have focused here. Our results suggest that this practice serves to accentuate the apparent effect of economic perceptions on vote choice by inducing respondents to strive for consistency between their stated vote and the economic evaluations they are subsequently requested to make. Lacking any firm basis for coming to an overall judgement about the performance of the macro-economy in the near past or future, responses to these items appear highly susceptible to such priming effects.

³ The high prevalence of tactical voting means that high proportions of people who, in our data set, are recorded as voting for the Liberal Democrats, or other parties, are actually supporters of either Labour or the Conservatives.

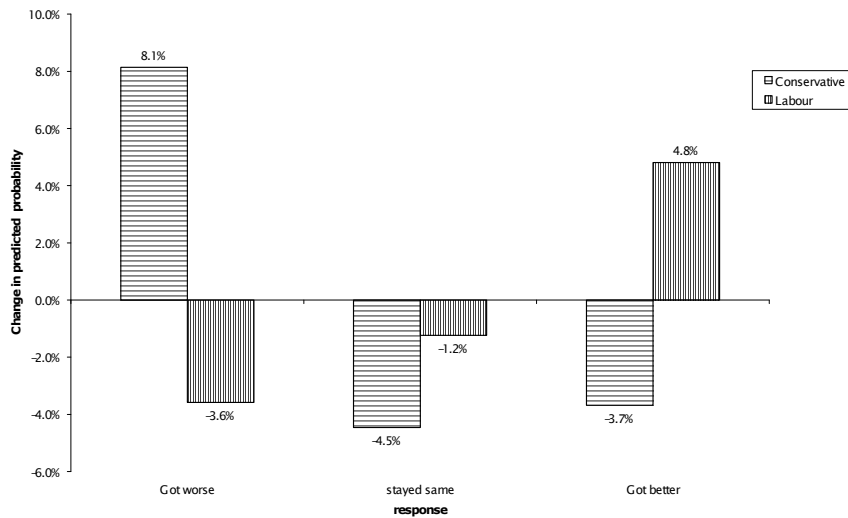


Figure 1. Change in predicted probability of Labour and Conservative votes, Retrospective Evaluations

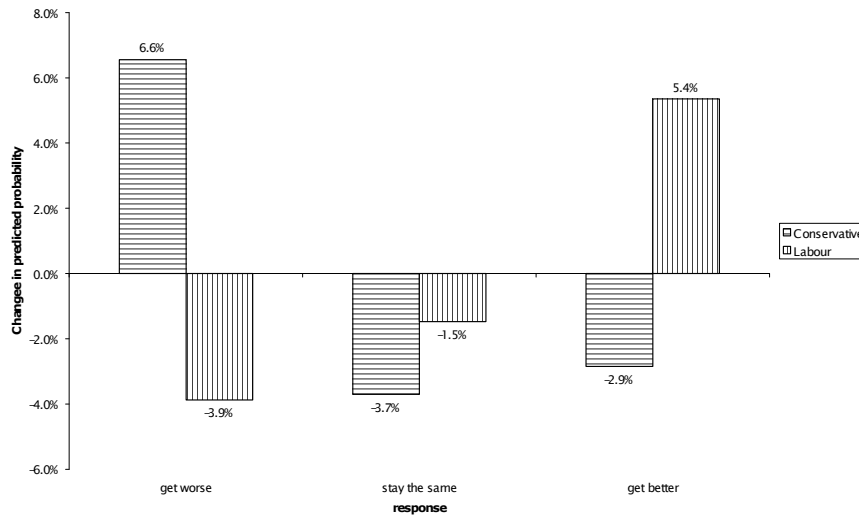


Figure 2. Change in predicted probability of Labour and Conservative votes, Retrospective Evaluations

While the magnitudes of the experimental effects we have observed are not especially large, neither was the experimental intervention employed particularly strong. It is plausible that a larger battery of items about party and leader preferences – such as are administered in election surveys – would engender more substantial effects. Counter to expectations, however, the priming effect of party choice was no greater for prospective than for retrospective evaluations. This suggests that the susceptibility of retrospective evaluations to this type of priming effect is not limited by the objective economic record.

Our results are consistent with the experimental findings of Wilcox and Wlezien (1996), despite the rather different populations and electoral contexts examined. On the other hand, we find significant endogeneity effects for both retrospective and prospective sociotropic evaluations, while

Palmer and Duch (2000) report significant effects only for ‘pocketbook’ items. This inconsistency may be related to the fact that the Hungarian government at the time of Palmer and Duch’s study was a two-party coalition, making it harder for respondents to apportion credit and blame. Equally, the difference might have emerged because the fieldwork for the Palmer and Duch study was conducted in the middle of the Hungarian electoral cycle, while ours was conducted immediately after the 2005 UK general election. Whatever the cause of this inconsistency, it seems clear that in the British context, standard post-election survey designs are likely to result in over-estimation of the effect of the economy on vote choice. It is, of course, likely that the endogeneity effects we have demonstrated here will not be limited to perceptions of economic performance. A useful area for future research, therefore, would be to investigate the extent to which these

findings generalize to other prominent areas of government policy, such as health, education, and the environment. In the meantime, we recommend that our findings be taken into account by analysts of existing election studies and by those designing such studies in the future.

Appendix: Question wordings

Vote Choice

1a. Talking to people about the general election on May 5th, we have found that a lot of people didn't manage to vote. How about you - did you manage to vote in the general election?

1. Yes, voted
2. No

[IF YES IN Q. 1a)]

1. b) Which party did you vote for in the general election?

1. Conservative
2. Labour
3. Liberal Democrat
4. Scottish National Party
5. Plaid Cymru
6. Green Party
7. Other Party
- (99. Refused to disclose voting)

Economic Perceptions

2. How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months. Has it:

1. Got a lot worse
2. Got a little worse
3. Stayed the same
4. Got a little better
5. Got a lot better
- (98. Don't Know)
- (99. Refused)

3. How do you think the general economic situation in this country will develop over the next 12 months? Will it:

1. Get a lot worse
2. Get a little worse
3. Stay the same
4. Get a little better
5. Get a lot better
- (98. Don't Know)
- (99. Refused)

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