

Clarity of responsibility & the mediating role of political campaigns*

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Abstract

Why does the clarity of responsibility thesis account so well for aggregate-level patterns of economic voting when, at the micro level, voters typically fail to act as the theory predicts? This paper begins to address the discordant findings between cross-national and individual-level studies of clarity of responsibility. Specifically, we argue that the political and economic structures thought to shape economic voting behavior do so only indirectly, via their influence on political elites. Specifically, simple campaign cues about the economy, and not complex signal-extraction calculations, mediate the oft-identified clarity of responsibility effect. We evaluate this argument empirically using survey data from 49 elections across 26 countries.

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1 Introduction

Studies of economic voting commonly observe that the link between economic performance and government support strengthens as the governments responsibility for economic outcomes becomes clearer. In Powell and Whitten's (1993) seminal formulation, the important features of context are political institutions that concentrate or diffuse control of policy-making (see also Whitten and Palmer 1999; Anderson 2000; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Anderson 2006). More recently, Hellwig (2001) and Duch and Stevenson (2008), among others, investigated the role of economic context, particularly the impact of exposure to global market forces on states' autonomy with respect to economic policy. Both accounts assume that citizens can and do form reasonable judgments regarding the causal role of particular incumbents in shaping current economic outcomes - judgments that are sensitive to the structural contests, both institutional and economic, in which governments make policy.

This "structural" account of the moderation of economic voting by the "clarity of responsibility" for political outcomes presupposes that citizens possess a level of information about political and economic contexts that, at a minimum, sits uneasily with decades of research emphasizing severe limitations on citizens' cognitive engagement with politics.¹ As Hellwig (2001, p. 1155) writes, "studies arguing in support of the structural influences of voting imply that electorates are in fact quite sophisticated." Whatever the general plausibility of this claim, there is evidence both that the media supply and that citizens receive some of the information required in the structural account, at least as regards economic considerations (Duch and Stevenson 2008, pp. 148-177). At the same time, more direct tests of the argument, especially in experimental settings, offer mixed support at best (Huber, Hill, and Lenz 2012; Campello and Jr 2015; Campello and Jr 2016; Duch, Przepiorka, and Stevenson 2015).

An alternative possibility is that the link between contextual clarity and economic voting flows through campaign discourse. In particular, it may be that structural variables, such as the presence of coalition government or a high level of market integration constrain elites' capacity to assign credit and blame for economic outcomes to political incumbents. These variable constraints, thus, may drive the level of attention parties and candidates accord economic considerations in their campaign messaging. In turn, consistent with past research (Vavreck 2009; Hart 2016; Lenz 2012, pp. 21-53), these elite cues ought to influence the weight of economic evaluations in the citizen's

¹Classic work in this tradition includes Converse (1964) and Carpini and Keeter (1997). For a forceful, recent restatement of this general perspective, see Achen and Bartels (2016).

vote calculus. Voter attention to economic considerations will, in this way, track clarity of responsibility, even if citizens do not directly contemplate the structural context of policy-making. Notably, this “campaign-centered” account of the link between clarity of responsibility and economic voting aligns neatly with Powell and Whitten’s (1993) original formulation of the clarity-of-responsibility argument, which emphasized how “blurred” political responsibility afforded “incumbents (and opponents)... many more opportunities to shape the definition of retrospective evaluation” (p. 410).

In this paper we investigate the role of election campaigns in connecting structural contexts to voters’ judgments of economic accountability. We combine survey data on voting behavior with indicators of structural economic and political contexts and the content of campaign discourse. In all, our analysis embraces 49 elections in 26 countries. In short, we replicate the conventional finding that perceptions of national economic performance shape vote choices but that the strength of this relationship varies with the political and economic institutions thought to determine the clarity of responsibility for economic outcomes. We also find that the strength of the economic vote varies systematically with the focus political candidates and parties pay to economic issues during the campaign. Yet, at least with the cases we analyze here, we find no evidence that the campaign message is the avenue through which clarity of responsibility conditions economic voting behavior.

2 Transmitting clarity to voters: two possibilities

Clarity-of-responsibility arguments are closely tied to the logic of electoral accountability at the heart of the economic voting literature: the view that the voter disciplines the behavior of governments by punishing (rewarding) poor (good) economic performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). Clarity arguments are focused on features of political and economic context that complicate this process by enlarging the set of actors, whether individual or collective, that can be expected to exercise a meaningful and autonomous influence on economic outcomes (see, especially, Duch and Stevenson 2008, pp. 139-147). Along the political dimension, for example, scholars have emphasized whether governmental power is concentrated in the hands of a single party - as under majority government in a Westminster parliamentary system - or shared across multiple parties - as in situations of coalition or minority government. Similarly, research treating economic determinants of clarity of responsibility has pointed to the importance of variables indicating exposure to global economic forces, such as trade openness (Hellwig 2001; Duch and Stevenson 2008). In general,

clarity is thought to be maximized when a single party monopolizes economic policy-making in a national setting that is relatively isolated from economic developments outside its borders.

How might these broad political and economic contexts shape voting behavior? The existing literature suggests two possibilities. The structural account, noted above, implies that contextual features shape voter cognition in a relatively direct fashion. Hellwig (2001, p. 1144) argues that the moderation of the economy-vote relationship by political contexts suggests that “voters are able to absorb and process information about the political context in which they live”. Extending this logic to his analysis of the effect of trade openness on economic voting, he finds that the negative influence of openness on the economy-vote link is confined to the relatively educated (p. 1156), who he reasons should be “more likely to incorporate global economic information” in their political evaluations (p. 1155). In a similar vein, Duch and Stevenson (2008) assume that “voters observe fluctuations in economic outcomes that inform them about incumbent competency” (p. 149), which in turn conditions economic voting. In the structural account, in short, the voter consciously - and more or less rationally - considers how features of the economic and political context ought to inform attributions of responsibility for economic outcomes.

To be sure, nothing in the structural account suggests that citizens are motivated to incur significant costs to acquire information about or to analyze economic and political variables; rather, the only required assumptions are that the relevant information is readily available to voters, and that voters are sufficiently motivated to attend to it. Accordingly, Duch and Stevenson (2008) present evidence, based on analysis of U.S. newspapers, that the “typical voter has access to considerable information” about “fluctuations in macro-economic outcomes” (p. 175). Further, these authors utilize survey data from six countries to show that voters have “attitudes regarding global influences on their national economies” that are “meaningful” and vary sensibly across countries (p. 176). Thus, while the informational demands of the structural account are not trivial, they are not unreasonable on their face.

Nevertheless, the alternative, campaign-centered account of the link between clarity of responsibility and economic voting makes demands of voter cognition that are considerably more modest. In this view, macro-political and macro-economic variables influence economic voting only indirectly - through the responsiveness of political elites to variation in the rhetorical opportunities afforded by different contexts. As noted above, Powell and Whitten (1993, p. 399) anticipate this line of argument, arguing that incumbents have incentives to “diffuse political responsibility”, but observing that the ability of incumbents to engage in this behavior is shaped by political context:

In the election debates, they can... obscure the weaknesses of their incumbency by blaming them on others who share power. American presidents have often had exceptional opportunities to do this by running against “Congress,” when controlled by the other party. Members of Congress do this by running against their colleagues.... opportunities to diffuse responsibility can be found in other countries as well. (p. 399)

The campaign-centered logic of Powell and Whitten’s argument is manifest in the references to “running against” other elected actors. More importantly, discussion of varying “opportunities” to cast blame and, by extension, take credit - for economic outcomes implies that political actors are constrained in their rhetoric as it relates to economic accountability.

Accordingly, we suggest that the objective clarity of responsibility for economic outcomes, shaped by political and economic contexts, may impart a degree of discipline with respect to campaign economic rhetoric. A beleaguered incumbent, for instance, may only be able to divest herself of responsibility for poor economic performance to the extent it is objectively plausible to shift blame for this outcome on to the shoulders of others. Likewise, an incumbent may not be able to take credit for a booming economy when that development reflects global trends over which the national government lacks meaningful control. Similar constraints may apply to opposition parties and candidates - for example, an opposition party’s ability to blame an economic downturn on the incumbent’s managerial incompetence may be limited in settings that diffuse policy-making authority away from government or subject the national economy to powerful global forces.²

If such rhetorical constraints are in operation, then they have important implications for political messaging during election campaigns: specifically, the intensity of economy-focused campaign rhetoric should, *ceteris paribus*, increase with the clarity of responsibility for economic outcomes. In a context where clarity is high, at least one party (or candidate) will have an incentive to emphasize economic considerations: in a growing economy, the incumbent will wish to take credit; in a shrinking economy, the opposition will wish to attach blame (*cf.*, Campbell 2000). Importantly, in such a “clear” political and economic context, neither the incumbent nor the opposition is afforded the opportunity to challenge claims of responsibility for economic performance. In a context where clarity is low, on the other hand, the incumbent’s efforts to take credit for economic good news, and opposition efforts to assign blame for economic bad news, can plausibly be challenged.³ Whether

²We are agnostic regarding the precise mechanisms through which constraint may operate. One possibility is that political elites, especially governments and parties, refrain from objectively implausible blame-shifting and credit-claiming because they anticipate such rhetoric will be credibly challenged by experts and, in turn, lead to negative electoral consequences.

³In contrast to our assumptions, in a recent study of the emphasis parties place on the economy in their manifestos, Williams, Seki, and Whitten (2016) propose that voters’ concern about the economy drives campaign attention. Contrary to our argument in this paragraph, these authors argue that when the economy is poor, both incumbent and

times are good or bad, therefore, campaign actors have less incentive to transmit economic messages in low-clarity than in high-clarity settings.

Such variation in the intensity of economy-focused rhetoric should generate a systematic relationship between clarity of responsibility and economic voting. Specifically, relative to low-clarity contexts, in high-clarity contexts voters' economic evaluations should be primed - that is, voters' economic views should carry relatively more weight in the vote decision (Lenz 2012; Hart 2016). Put differently, in settings where responsibility for economic outcomes is relatively easier to attribute, campaigns' greater attention to economic considerations should lead voters to place more emphasis on their economic views in arriving at a vote choice.

Importantly, unlike the structural account, the campaign-centered account of the link between economic voting and clarity of responsibility does not require voters to possess beliefs about the political responsibility for economic outcomes, much less to incorporate such beliefs in a relatively-sophisticated calculus of economic voting. Indeed, the campaign-centered view allows that voters may even respond relatively passively to economic messaging, responding thoughtlessly to campaign rhetoric through the automatic activation of economic considerations.⁴ In investigating the role of campaign economic rhetoric in the moderation of economic voting by clarity of responsibility, thus, this paper also speaks to more general questions regarding citizen competence.

3 Data and key measures

Our analysis of the potential mediating effect of campaign messaging on the clarity of responsibility effect relies on several data sets spanning 49 elections in 26 countries around the world. Specifically, we bring together individual-level data from national election studies, election-level content analysis of party platforms, and national-level data on political and economic institutions. Together, the data allow us to estimate the strength of the economic vote across numerous electoral contexts, evaluate the moderating effect of "clarity of responsibility," and assess the extent to which economic

opposition parties will emphasize the economy, in order to establish credibility in the economic domain. Conversely, Williams and colleagues suggest that when the economy is doing well, no party will attend to it, as the economy will not be a matter of high concern to voters. Importantly, even assuming this alternative logic of campaign economic messaging, we can readily imagine a moderating role for clarity of responsibility that yields the same predictions as our model. That is, if we add to Williams, Seki and Whitten's model the assumption that the penalty for not attending to the public's economic concerns is greater in systems where clarity of responsibility is high, then we would still generate the expectation that economic focus will increase with clarity.

⁴It is also possible, however, that priming operates through more active mechanisms, such as through changes in beliefs about the importance of different judgment-relevant considerations (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 2000, pp. 302-303).

campaign messages mediate that relationship. Here we describe and discuss the key measures in our analysis. Note that the Appendix provides a more detailed account of variable coding, outlines our approach to missing data, and presents marginal distributions for the full data set.

3.1 Economic opinion, vote choice, and the economic vote

In order to gauge the strength of association between judgments of national economic performance and vote choices, we rely on survey data from Module 1 (1996-2001) and Module 4 (2011-2016) of the Cooperative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File (1982-1994).⁵ Focusing specifically on national elections for the chief executive, the data set contains records for 64,342 respondents across 49 national elections across Europe, Africa, North America, Australasia, and the Middle East. We include data from parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential regimes, developed and developing nations, and multiple electoral systems.

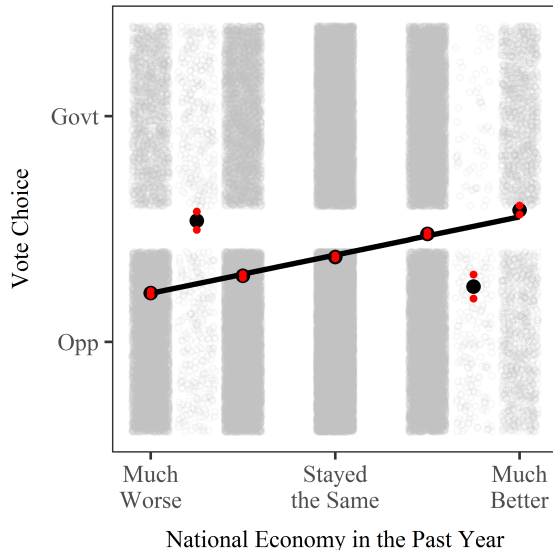
The key independent variable in our analysis is an individual’s judgment of national economic performance. We score responses on a 0 to 1 scale, where 1 signals that the economy has gotten “much better” over the past year. Respondents in the full data set thought their nation’s economy was “about the same” over the relevant period (mean = 0.47). Yet there is considerable variation across elections. Sample means range from almost uniformly negative (e.g., Greece 2012 in the height of the debt crisis) to quite positive (e.g., Norway 1997), and there are sizable shifts in the distribution of economic evaluations across elections within the same country.

The dependent variable is an individual’s vote for or against a party in government (or the incumbent-party candidate in presidential systems) when the election is called. We identified parties in government using a number of online resources. Note that we rely on first-round votes in multi-round elections and on party-list votes in mixed electoral systems. We also code a measure of vote choice for or against the party of the chief executive, and our empirical findings are robust to using either indicator.

Figure 1 presents the economic voting relationship as the joint distribution of these variables. The small gray dots are individual survey respondents. The larger black dots represent the share of votes for the government across the range of economic opinion, and the slope of the regression line equals the economic vote. Not surprisingly, the government’s vote share increases as evaluations of national economic performance become more positive.

⁵CSES Modules 2 and 3 do not include a measure of economic opinion in the common questionnaire. Similarly the Eurobarometer does not survey economic perceptions or vote choice outside of these dates

Figure 1: Economic opinion and support for the government across elections



Note: Scatter and least-squares fit of vote choice across perceptions of national economic performance. Gray dots represent individual respondents (“jittered” for visibility). Black dots represent mean level of support for the government, and red dots are 95% confidence bounds.

Econometrically, we define the economic vote as the average change in the probability of voting for the government given a shift in economic evaluation from much worse to much better (the slope of the regression line above). As the magnitude of that shift increases, it signals a stronger economic vote. We use ordinary least squares regression to estimate this effect. Table 1 presents the estimates for models with and without individual-level covariates and with and without country and study fixed effects.

Across models, we find that a voter who thinks the economy has gotten much better is 29 to 37 percentage points more likely to cast a ballot for the government or the incumbent party than a voter who thinks the economy has gotten much worse. It is unlikely that we observe this relationship by chance alone ($p < 0.001$ across models). Note that models 2 and 5 include individual and national covariates; models 3 and 6 include both country and study fixed effects. While the covariates condition out individual-specific factors that might shape economic perceptions and vote choices, the fixed effects control for unmeasured country-specific or study-specific differences.

Table 1: Estimating the magnitude of the economic vote

	DV: Vote for Govt			DV: Vote for Incumb		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Econ Opinion	0.34*** (0.01)	0.37*** (0.01)	0.37*** (0.01)	0.29*** (0.01)	0.33*** (0.01)	0.35*** (0.01)
Covariates	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Country FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Study FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	64,342	64,342	64,342	64,342	64,342	64,342
Adjusted R ²	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.08

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Covariates include individual-level measures of political ideology, education, and sex, as well as GDP per capita growth.

3.2 Clarity of responsibility for economic outcomes

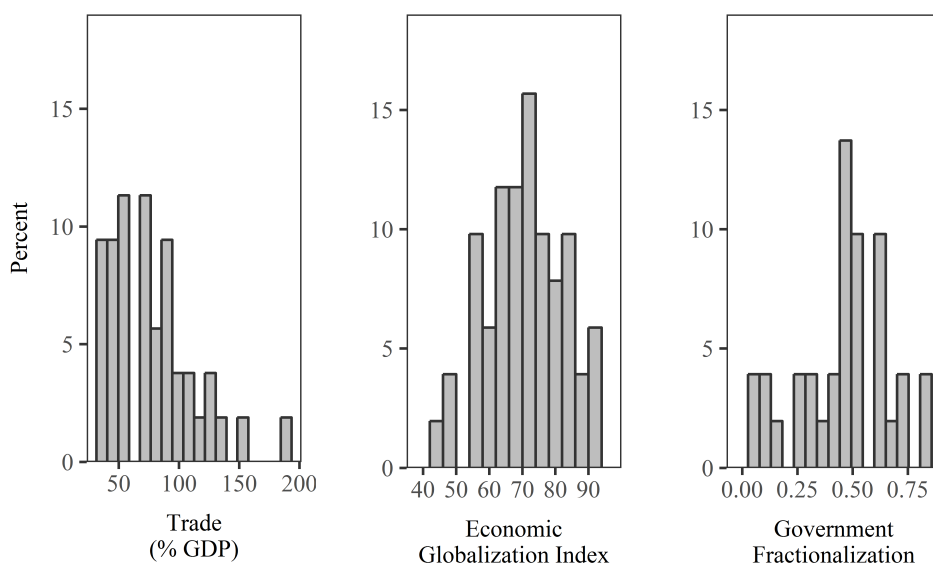
We rely on three indicators to gauge the clarity of responsibility for economic outcomes in the elections in our sample: trade, government fractionalization, and economic globalization.⁶ Each variable captures the extent to which political or economic institutions clarify or obscure the government’s hand in national economic performance, and prior studies commonly use these same indicators. Trade reflects a country’s level of integration into the global economy. Government fractionalization equals the probability that two elected officials selected at random from the governing coalition belong to different parties. A score of 0 indicates single-party rule, and a score of 1 signals that there are as many parties as there are people in a governing coalition. Finally, the KOF Index of Globalization measures investment and trade flows as well as policies that restrict those flows. It thus includes intended economic openness and the outcomes of it.

Figure 2 displays the distribution for each indicator. Note that scores reflect values recorded in the year prior to the election, and higher values signal lower clarity of responsibility. The distributions are quite similar and roughly normal across the three indicators of clarity. Yet, for several reasons, we employ these indicators separately rather than combine them as other studies have done. First, the indicators capture fundamentally different information about clarity. Trade captures the outward-looking dimension of clarity. In highly trade-dependent economies, shifts in economic performance may reflect unfolding international events rather than the government’s competence in managing economic affairs. By contrast, fractionalization captures the inward-looking dimension

⁶Data on trade as a share of gross domestic product come from the World Bank World Development Indicators. Data on government fractionalization come from the World Bank Database of Political Institutions.

of clarity, or the extent to which elected officials have the political power to pass economic reforms. As fractionalization increases (i.e., as the number of parties constituting the government increases), it becomes difficult to pass economic policy and even more difficult to lay credit or blame for it at the foot of a particular party. Economic globalization combines information on both the domestic and international components of the clarity signal.

Figure 2: Clarity of responsibility across elections



Note: Histograms for three measures of clarity of responsibility. For each measure, higher scores represent lower levels of clarity (e.g., competence signals are difficult to extract in highly globalized economies).

Second, we rely on these measures of clarity rather than create a single index because we see no way of combining them without strong, untestable assumptions about measurement. These three measures do not load onto a single factor. Beyond factor analysis, we have serious reservations about the construction of clarity scores in prior studies, especially the justification for some of their coding choices (e.g., non-linear scoring of some indicators and uneven weighting across indicators). As a result, we take what we think is a simple, agnostic approach to measuring the clarity of responsibility.

3.3 Salience of economic issues during the campaign

We capture the intensity of economy-focused campaign rhetoric with an indicator built from the most recent iteration of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) dataset (Volken et al. 2016;

Klingemann et al. 2006). The CMP data measure the salience of a standard set of topics in parties' campaign manifestos across 56 countries since 1945. The dataset covers manifestos from thousands of parties across hundreds of elections, including all of those included in our survey data. The CMP coding protocol assigns each "quasi-sentence" within a manifesto to one of 56 topic categories, which are themselves organized into seven general "domains" (Werner, Lacewell, and Volkens 2015, pp. 5-8). A quasi-sentence is a distinct "message" or "statement", and each grammatical sentence can contain one or more quasi-sentences (p. 6). While these data are commonly used to generate indicators of parties' policy positions, some past research has used the CMP coding to measure the salience of policy issues in electoral contexts (e.g., Greene 2015; Williams, Seki, and Whitten 2016). Importantly, interviews with party elites suggest that manifestos generally track party messaging in other campaign settings, such as advertising and speeches (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011, p. 372).

In measuring campaign economic focus we aim to capture parties' emphasis on topics connected to economic growth and the means to achieve it, on the assumption that it is through discussion of these themes that parties seek to emphasize the economy to voters. As such, in addition to direct mentions of economic growth as a goal, we track references to a wide diversity of policy approaches and instruments designed to deliver growth, from an emphasis on "laissez-faire economy" to "direct government control of the economy" and "nationalization". Altogether we include all topics in the "Economy" domain, excluding "Marxist Analysis" and "Anti-Growth Economy" (see Werner, Lacewell, and Volkens 2015, pp. 20-22, for the relevant coding instructions).⁷ In the analysis, the core measure of campaign economic focus is the mean percentage of major parties' manifestos that is coded to the designated set of topics. In this calculation, a "major party" is one that is ranked, in post-election seat shares, within the first n ranks, where n equals 2 or the "effective number of parties" (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) in parliament rounded to the nearest integer, whichever is greater.⁸

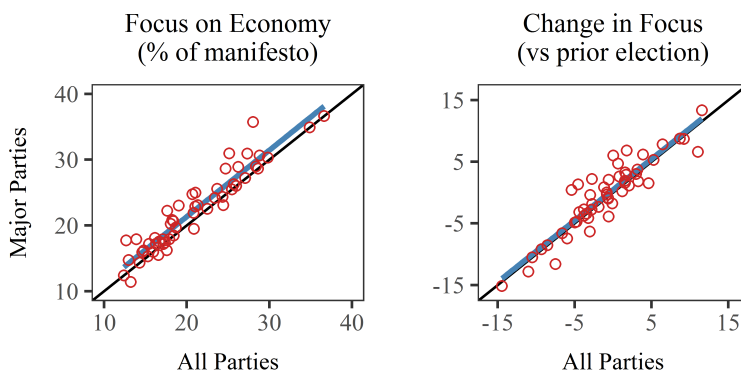
Figure 3 plots the distribution of economic focus scores for the major parties against the measure for all parties. The panel on the left records contemporaneous scores (as a percentage of the total manifesto) while the right-hand panel records the change in economic focus (relative to the prior national election). Both panels also show the linear relationship between the two measures

⁷Williams, Seki, and Whitten (2016) construct a very similar measure at the party level, except that they include all 16 categories in the "Economy" domain.

⁸As it happens, across the CMP dataset as a whole, it matters little whether the measure includes all parties or only major parties: the correlation (r) between the measures is .90.

(blue) and a 45-degree line (black). First, it is apparent that both indicators of the economic message capture roughly the same information about the campaign focus on economic issues. The regression line is nearly equal to the 45-degree line in each case. Second, though there is considerable variation in economic focus across campaigns, the typical election in our data set gave significant attention to economic themes. Finally, there is also substantial over-time variation in the focus on economic issues. Our measures are not simply capturing cross-national differences in attention to economic issues.

Figure 3: Comparing measures of campaign focus on economic issues



Note: Scatter plots of two measures of economic campaign focus. Each relies on the Comparative Manifesto Project coding of party platforms. The blue and black lines represent the linear fit and the 45-degree line respectively.

4 Analysis

Following the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach to mediation analysis, we proceed in three steps. First, we replicate the conventional finding that the clarity of responsibility conditions the strength of the economic vote. Second, we examine the possibility that the economic vote strengthens with the parties' focus on economic issues during the campaign. Third, we explore whether or not the clarity of responsibility effect attenuates after controlling for the campaign priming effect. Note that estimates of these models using vote for the chief executive as the outcome measure are available on request.

Table 2 presents estimates of the clarity of responsibility effect. Here we build on the models in Figure 1, interacting individual-level perceptions of economic performance with each of the three measures of clarity. Recall that higher scores reflect lower levels of clarity. In each case,

the estimates mirror the conventional clarity of responsibility finding. The estimated interaction terms are all negative and statistically significant beyond $p = 0.01$, and the coefficients are robust to different modeling choices.⁹ Looking at model 1, for instance, we expect that the economic vote the change in probability of supporting the government given a shift in economic opinion from “much worse” to “much better” shrinks by 0.03 for every 10-percentage point increase in trade dependence. Therefore, we successfully replicate the conventional finding that the economic vote weakens as political and economic structures obscure clarity of responsibility for national economic performance.

Table 2: The clarity of responsibility effect

	DV: Vote for Government		
	Trade	Glob	GovFrac
Econ opinion	0.53*** (0.02)	0.41*** (0.01)	0.46*** (0.05)
Clarity	-0.003*** (0.0002)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.31*** (0.03)
* Econ opinion	-0.002*** (0.0003)	-0.001** (0.001)	-0.13*** (0.03)
Observations	64,342	62,221	62,787
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.08	0.08

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. All models include individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects, and study fixed effects (estimates suppressed for space).

To provide a more stringent and more direct test of the clarity thesis we evaluate the moderating effect of changes in clarity rather than the contemporaneous level of responsibility. Here we interact economic opinion with clarity scores from the prior year and the change in clarity scores. Note that, for the fractionalization measure, we use scores from the prior national election rather than the prior year. If we find that the interaction effects are negative and significant, it suggests (though, again, the identification is quite weak) that voters update the weight they attach to economic perceptions in accordance with over-time changes in the government’s ability to drive economic performance. There is more fidelity between this and the signal-extraction process that Duch and Stevenson (2008) describe than in the models above. Table 3 presents the estimates.

⁹We also estimate models with and without individual-level covariates and with various fixed effects. We find that the estimates are robust to these modeling choices (results available on request).

Again, each model includes individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects and study fixed effects. Here the results replicate the clarity of responsibility finding for trade ($p < 0.001$) and economic globalization ($p = 0.04$), government fractionalization shocks have no effect on the strength of the economic vote ($p = 0.35$). This is hardly cause to reject the clarity thesis altogether, but it does begin to raise a question about models that rely simply on the level of clarity. One might worry, for instance, that the contemporary, static measures are unwitting proxies for the broader political climate. For instance, current government fractionalization scores may reflect poor government performance in prior years rather than just the power of the government to shape economic policies. Moreover, the lack of an effect for the fractionalization score is notable in that the composition of the government is far more visible to voters than trade dependence or economic globalization. It would appear to be the easiest test of voters' capacity to extract and process competence signals.

Table 3: Voter response to over-time shifts in clarity of responsibility

	DV: Vote for Government		
	Trade	Glob	GovFrac
Econ opinion	0.53*** (0.02)	0.52*** (0.05)	0.41*** (0.01)
Δ Clarity	0.005** (0.002)	0.03*** (0.003)	0.27*** (0.03)
* Econ opinion	-0.01*** (0.003)	-0.01** (0.005)	-0.04 (0.04)
Clarity (lag)	-0.003*** (0.0002)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.55*** (0.04)
* Econ opinion	-0.002*** (0.0003)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.18*** (0.03)
Observations	64,342	62,221	62,787
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.08	0.09

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. All models include individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects, and study fixed effects (estimates suppressed for space).

Our next step is to evaluate the possibility that political elites shape the strength of the economic vote by amplifying or muting the focus on economic issues during the campaign. Here we follow the same estimation strategy as above, interacting judgments of national economic performance with the salience of economic issues during the campaign. Table 4 displays the estimates.

Both models rely on the major party measure of economic message described in the prior section (our default measure moving forward), though the results are robust to the all party alternative. Looking at model 1 we find that the economic vote strengthens as the parties focus in on the economy. Each percentage-point increase in campaign focus increases the magnitude of the economic vote by 0.01. It is unlikely that we observe this relationship by chance ($p < 0.001$). To ensure that we are not simply capturing baseline differences in both economic voting and campaign messages across countries (similar to a between-effects estimator), model 2 interacts economic opinion with the focus on the economy in the prior election and the change in focus versus the prior election. If the priming argument is correct, we should see that “focus shocks” increase the strength of the economic vote. The estimates support this expectation. The coefficient estimate for the interaction term is positive and statistically significant.

Table 4: Campaign Focus and the Economic Vote

	DV: Vote for Government	
	(1)	(2)
Econ opinion	0.23*** (0.03)	0.29*** (0.03)
Campaign focus	-0.01*** (0.001)	
* Econ opinion	0.01*** (0.001)	
Δ Campaign focus		-0.01*** (0.001)
* Econ opinion		0.01*** (0.001)
Campaign focus (lag)		-0.01*** (0.001)
* Econ opinion		0.004*** (0.001)
Observations	64,342	64,342
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.09

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. All models include individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects, and study fixed effects (estimates suppressed for space).

Finally, we combine these approaches to evaluate the potential role of campaign focus in mediating the clarity of responsibility effect. We re-estimate the clarity models from Table 2 and

Table 3 with and without the campaign-economy interaction from 4. If the salience of economic issues during the campaign is the mechanism that drives the clarity of responsibility relationship, we should observe a positive and significant campaign-economy interaction and, crucially, attenuation in the clarity-economy interaction after controlling for the effect of campaign salience. Table 5 presents estimates of models interacting economic opinion with each measure of clarity as well as our measure of the parties' focus on economic issues during the campaign. Interestingly, the moderating effects of clarity and the economic campaign message are both evident. The parties' focus on economic issues during national election campaigns conditions the strength of the economic vote even when controlling for the moderating effect of clarity. However, we find no evidence that controlling for this effect attenuates the effect of clarity for economic outcomes on the strength of the economic vote.

Table 5: Campaign priming & the clarity effect, levels

	DV: Vote for Government		
	Trade	Glob	GovFrac
Econ opinion	0.44*** (0.03)	0.44*** (0.05)	0.30*** (0.03)
Clarity	-0.002*** (0.0002)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.35*** (0.03)
* Econ opinion	-0.002*** (0.0003)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.10*** (0.03)
Campaign focus	-0.01*** (0.001)	-0.02*** (0.001)	-0.01*** (0.001)
* Econ opinion	0.004*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Observations	64,342	62,221	62,787
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.09	0.09

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. All models include individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects, and study fixed effects (estimates suppressed for space).

Finally, we turn back to the models that focus on changes in clarity and changes in the economic campaign message. Again, these models of change seem to match the individual-level, psychological underpinnings of both the clarity and the campaign priming arguments more effectively than the static models. So Table 6 presents estimates of the models above using changes in each measure rather than the level. We find again that the campaign focus on the economy moderates the

strength of the economic vote. Even after controlling for the effect of political and economic institutions thought to drive the economic vote, changes in the campaign focus systematically shape the strength of the economic vote. That said, the evidence that the campaign priming effect mediates the clarity of responsibility thesis receives only mixed support. Controlling for campaign priming has no effect on the trade-economy interaction. The coefficient is virtually unchanged. However, there is considerable attenuation in the effect of economic globalization. Here, the coefficient drops from -.01 to -.006 and loses statistical significance. Similarly, the effect of government fractionalization remains statistically insignificant.

Table 6: Campaign priming & the clarity effect, changes

	DV: Vote for Government		
	Trade	Glob	GovFrac
Econ opinion	0.50*** (0.04)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.31*** (0.04)
Δ Clarity	0.002 (0.002)	0.01 (0.003)	0.38*** (0.03)
* Econ opinion	-0.01*** (0.003)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.04 (0.04)
Clarity (lag)	-0.002*** (0.0002)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.77*** (0.04)
* Econ opinion	-0.002*** (0.0003)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.12*** (0.04)
Δ Campaign focus	-0.01*** (0.001)	-0.02*** (0.001)	-0.01*** (0.001)
* Econ opinion	0.005*** (0.002)	0.01*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.001)
Campaign focus (lag)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.02*** (0.001)	-0.02*** (0.001)
* Econ opinion	0.002 (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.002)
Observations	64,342	62,221	62,787
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.09	0.09

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. All models include individual and election-level controls, country fixed effects, and study fixed effects (estimates suppressed for space).

5 Discussion and conclusion

Why does the clarity of responsibility thesis account so well for variation in the economic vote across elections when extensive research in economics, psychology, and political science suggest that individuals often fail to behave as the theory predicts? We proposed an alternative to the conventional argument that voters condition their willingness to hold governments accountable for national economic performance by decomposing economic information into competency/responsibility signals and exogenous shocks. We argued that the political and economic institutions thought to clarify the government's responsibility for economic performance do so indirectly through their influence on political campaigns. Specifically, we argued that the government's role in creating the economic context at the time of the election drives political parties to focus more or less on economic issues during the campaign. As clarity increases, candidates intensify their economic message and prime the economic vote.

We evaluated the extent to which economic campaign messages mediate the clarity of responsibility relationship using data from 49 elections in 28 countries. First, we replicated the traditional findings that voters around the world turn to their opinions of national economic performance when evaluating the government. Second, we find the weight voters attach to economic perceptions wanes in highly globalized economies. However, for the elections studied here, the evidence that voters respond systematically to changes in the fractionalization of the government is mixed at best. This is surprising given that shocks to the cabinet composition ought to be the simplest and most salient of competence cues. Third, we see a systematic relationship between the parties' focus on economic issues and the strength of the economic vote: as economic issues become more central to party platforms, economic perceptions weigh more heavily on vote choices. Finally, we find only mixed evidence that the priming effect of economic campaign messages mediates the clarity of responsibility relationship. The moderating effect of trade on the economic vote is robust to the inclusion of measures of the intensity of economic campaign messages. Yet, the effect of economic globalization and government fractionalization is not. Here it seems then that the political and economic institutions thought to clarify responsibility shape economic voting behavior in part through their effect on the parties' focus on economic issues. That said, the effect is not dramatic. At most we see preliminary evidence that political elites play an important role in mediating the effect of complex political structures on individual-level voting behavior.

What accounts for our findings, and what do they mean for a campaign-centered account of the clarity of responsibility thesis? One possibility is that our convenience sample is insufficient. We may see more robust results (in support of either thesis) as we continue adding more elections and from a wider range of countries. Second, it may be that political elites are in fact the conduit between broad structural forces and individual citizens but that we either have a poor measure of economic salience or issue salience is not the key mode of transmission. Finally, we may just be wrong. Perhaps campaign behavior neither informs nor influences attributions of responsibility for national economic performance. Regardless, we still face an open puzzle about the persistence of aggregate-level or cross-sectional evidence in support of the clarity of responsibility thesis and repeated findings that voters around the world fail to decompose economic signals and/or to attribute responsibility as the theory predicts. We sought to propose a simpler and more convincing account of the mechanisms that link complex political and economic institutions to individual perceptions and voting behavior. We are hopeful that future research in this vein will uncover these pathways.

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Appendix

This codebook proceeds in two sections. The first describes individual level data based on the CSES Questionnaire Modules 1 and 4 as well as the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend file. The second part features election level data with variables from the Comparative Manifesto Project and the Quality of Governance dataset.

Individual-level data

The CSES data combine individual level responses to national election studies around the world, mostly OECD democracies and Central and Eastern European countries, between 1996-2015. Note again that we use only cases from Modules 1 and 4 because Modules 2 and 3 did not record economic perceptions. The Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend file data combine responses to semi-annual, national surveys across Europe from 1970-2002. We isolate only those country-surveys that follow within two months of a national election. In total, we have records for 64,342 voters across 49 elections in 28 countries. With the exception of the measures of vote choice, we impute missing values using the election-specific median score. For the sake of clarity, Table 7 at the end of the Appendix displays information on each election included in the analysis.

Incumbent vote - Binary indicator recording a vote for or against the ruling party (party of the president or party of the prime minister) in an election. We record the respondents vote in the party list in mixed-member elections and the vote in the first round of multi-round elections. Lastly, we relied on votes in the lower house of bicameral parliamentary systems.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rel (%)</i>
1	Incumbent	20,053	31.17
0	Against	44,289	68.83

Government vote - Binary indicator recording a vote for or against a party in government at the time the election was called.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rel (%)</i>
1	Government	23,813	37.01
0	Opposition	40,529	62.99

Economic opinion - Records responses to a two-part question gauging national economic performance over the past year: “Would you say that over the past twelve months, the state of the economy in [country] has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? How much [better/worse]?” We score responses on a 0 to 1 scale from much worse to much better. Respondents who gave an answer in the first stage but not in the second stage (i.e., economy has gotten better, but unsure if much vs. somewhat better) received a score between the two. We imputed election-specific medians for missing scores in the first stage.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rel (%)</i>
0	Much worse	8,221	12.78
0.125	Worse (unsure)	583	0.91
0.25	Gotten worse	12,631	19.63
0.5	Stayed the same	26,275	40.84
0.75	Somewhat better	14,092	21.90
0.875	Better (unsure)	249	0.39
1	Much better	2,291	3.56

Female - Records respondents self-identification as female (1) or not female (0).

<i>Score</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rel (%)</i>
1	Female	32,766	50.92
0	Not	31,576	49.08

Ideology - Self-placement on the left-right spectrum. We code scores from 0 (left) to 1 (right)

Education - Highest level of education scaled from 0 (none) to 1 (undergraduate degree & higher).

Table A1: Descriptive statistics for individual-level, continuous variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>1st Qu</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>3rd Qu</i>	<i>Max</i>
Ideology	0.00	0.40	0.50	0.52	0.70	1.00
Education	0.00	0.43	0.57	0.61	0.71	1.00

Election-level data

Here we use data from the Quality of Governance dataset and content coding of party platforms by the Comparative Manifesto Project. See Table A2 at the end of this section for descriptive statistics for each indicator. Note that we record measures of the clarity and economic variables as of January 1 of the election year.

Globalization - The KOF Economic Globalization Index records both the flow of goods and services, including trade, as well as official restrictions on those flows, including tariffs. The variable is scored from 0 to 100 with 100 signaling maximum economic globalization.

Trade (%GDP) - The sum value of exports and imports as a share of gross domestic product (GDP). Measured by the World Bank World Development Indicators.

Government Fractionalization - The probability that two members of parliament selected at random from the governing parties will be of different parties. A score of 0 indicates that a single party forms the government (including in presidential systems) and 1 indicates that there are as many parties in the government as there are members of that government. Scored by the World Bank Database of Political Institutions.

Economic Focus (all parties) - The average focus on economic issues, defined as the share of quasi-sentences in a party platform referring to the economy, across all parties in the election. We

rely on content coding from the Comparative Manifesto Project data, and we restrict economic issues to all topics in the CMP “Economy” domain except for “Marxist analysis” and “Anti-growth economy.”

Economic Focus (major parties) - Calculated as above, the average focus on economic issues only among major parties. We define major parties as those ranked, in post-election seat share, within the first n ranks, where n is equal to the rounded effective number of parties or 2, whichever is greater. In an election with 3.4 effective parties, for example, we calculate the average focus on the economy among the 3 largest parties.

GDP per capita growth - Annual growth rate of per capita GDP (World Bank World Development Indicators).

Table A2: Descriptive statistics for election-level indicators

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>1st Qu</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>3rd Qu</i>	<i>Max</i>
Globalization	42.78	63.62	70.99	70.99	80.47	94.18
Trade	35.40	53.73	64.71	74.19	90.10	184.50
Fractionalization	0	0	0.31	0.30	0.50	0.85
Focus (all)	12.38	16.58	19.04	20.83	25.16	36.63
Focus (major)	11.40	17.36	21.90	22.18	25.99	36.63
GDP per cap (% Δ)	-7.05	0.44	2.19	1.95	3.58	7.02

Table 7: Summary of elections in the study

Country	Year	GovVote	IncVote	Econ	N	Study
Australia	1996	0.36	0.36	0.39	1,715	CSES
Australia	2013	0.32	0.32	0.49	3,889	CSES
Belgium	1999	0.41	0.14	0.55	3,417	CSES
Canada	1997	0.35	0.35	0.60	1,443	CSES
Czech Rep	1996	0.50	0.34	0.47	1,084	CSES
Czech Rep	2013	0.16	0.06	0.36	1,019	CSES
Denmark	1988	0.24	0.18	0.32	1,006	EB
Denmark	1990	0.23	0.18	0.42	927	EB
Denmark	1994	0.44	0.35	0.58	971	EB
Denmark	1998	0.31	0.31	0.55	1,836	CSES
France	1988	0.18	0.13	0.51	1,001	EB
France	2012	0.21	0.21	0.22	1,727	CSES
Germany	1990	0.39	0.34	0.56	882	EB
Germany	1994	0.37	0.31	0.49	829	EB
Germany	1998	0.34	0.26	0.49	1,662	CSES
Germany	2013	0.39	0.39	0.53	1,474	CSES
Greece	1990	0.36	0.36	0.35	875	EB
Greece	2012	0.28	0.28	0.18	738	CSES
Iceland	1999	0.62	0.43	0.57	1,280	CSES
Iceland	2013	0.27	0.15	0.57	1,228	CSES
Ireland	1982	0.38	0.38	0.16	939	EB
Ireland	2011	0.16	0.16	0.18	1,384	CSES
Israel	1996	0.49	0.49	0.47	913	CSES
Mexico	2000	0.28	0.28	0.45	1,338	CSES
Mexico	2012	0.22	0.22	0.36	2,054	CSES
Montenegro	2012	0.53	0.53	0.21	652	CSES
Netherlands	1994	0.37	0.16	0.48	1,006	EB
Netherlands	1998	0.63	0.29	0.64	1,630	CSES
New Zealand	1996	0.30	0.30	0.55	3,827	CSES
New Zealand	2011	0.52	0.49	0.35	1,223	CSES
Norway	1997	0.35	0.35	0.65	1,762	CSES
Poland	1997	0.33	0.25	0.50	1,102	CSES
Portugal	1987	0.31	0.31	0.63	1,000	EB
Portugal	2002	0.41	0.41	0.27	784	CSES
Romania	1996	0.32	0.32	0.37	845	CSES
Romania	2012	0.74	0.74	0.41	1,406	CSES
S. Africa	2014	0.66	0.66	0.46	821	CSES
S. Korea	2012	0.47	0.47	0.29	744	CSES
Serbia	2012	0.35	0.22	0.30	903	CSES
Slovenia	1996	0.34	0.34	0.41	1,124	CSES
Spain	1986	0.30	0.30	0.47	1,010	EB
Spain	1993	0.28	0.28	0.23	854	EB
Spain	1996	0.49	0.43	0.45	931	CSES
Spain	2000	0.58	0.51	0.63	827	CSES
Sweden	1998	0.38	0.38	0.57	985	CSES
Turkey	2015	0.44	0.44	0.34	881	CSES
U.K.	1997	0.26	26 0.26	0.56	2,364	CSES
U.K.	2015	0.50	0.41	0.54	1,240	CSES
Ukraine	1998	0.66	0.04	0.25	790	CSES