Just the Facts? Partisan Media and the Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the effects of biases in economic information on partisans’ economic perceptions. In survey experiments, I manipulate the presence of partisan cues and the direction of proattitudinal information in news stories about the American economy. Results demonstrate that while proattitudinal tone in factual economic news stories most strongly affects partisans’ economic perceptions, inclusion of partisan cues alongside proattitudinal information results in weaker shifts in economic sentiment relative to stories lacking partisan content. These findings suggest that the relatively subtle process of agenda-setting in economic news may be the most effective tool used by partisan news outlets to drive polarization in citizens’ factual economic perceptions.
In recent years, scholars of economic voting have turned their attention to the question of partisan bias in economic retrospections (e.g., Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Gerber and Huber 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).¹ A growing body of evidence points to the notion that party identification is a strong causal driver of citizens’ economic perceptions (and hence their economic voting behavior), though the mechanism supporting this link is currently the subject of scholarly debate. Among the possible explanations, studies have recalled an earlier literature that shows how citizens’ sociotropic economic perceptions are shaped by their exposure to media narratives (e.g., MacKuen et al. 1992; Mutz 1992; Soroka 2006). These findings have reinforced the idea that media portrayals of the American economy are a critical subsidy of information used by citizens across the political spectrum to engage in performance voting.

Media effects on economic evaluations have evolved in tandem with the development of a fragmented, partisan media environment. Since the mid-1990’s, scholars have documented the rise of niche ideological media, in part due to technological innovations such as the growth of cable availability (e.g., Hume 1996; Prior 2007; Stroud 2011). This partisan 24-hour news cycle, in which a panoply of ideological voices has joined the ever-widening array of media outlets available to citizens, appears to be affecting the degree of partisan bias in citizens’ economic evaluations (Larcinese et al. 2011). In this study, I seek to analyze the effects of different types of bias in the presentation of economic news on citizens’ perceptions. I argue that instead of overt partisan cues which attribute responsibility to partisan actors for economic developments, the most influential form of bias in economic news is the presentation of congenial (also known as proattitudinal) economic information. This bias is achieved through selective presentation of economic indicators: news outlets will frequently present facts which most accord with a partisan interpretation of economic reality, devoid of any overt partisan cues or politically-charged
language. When the incumbent Presidential administration shares its party identification with the network’s preferred party, economic indicators showing negative trends are less likely to be discussed. When the incumbent is a member of the opposing party, the same indicators are discussed more frequently. This type of bias can be contrasted with a more overt partisan style, in which commentators explicitly link positive or negative economic developments to partisan actors using party cues. These partisan attributions of responsibility for economic developments provide a slanted interpretation of how the economy responds to the actions of the President and members of Congress.

Using experimental evidence from the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, I provide a test of the effects of these two forms of bias on the economic retrospections of partisans. In survey experiments, I manipulate both the presence of partisan cueing and the congeniality of economic information. The results show that when considering proattitudinal economic information in the absence of cues, partisans consistently adjust their economic perceptions in the proattitudinal direction. The inclusion of partisan cues which attribute responsibility for economic events, however, diminishes these treatment effects. ‘Objective’ economic information (but only that which happens to accord with a partisan interpretation of reality) most strongly affects the economic retrospections of partisans. Further, when comparing positive and negative stories which include attribution cues, it appears that partisans’ economic evaluations conform to nearly identical patterns. This finding suggests that in the presence of attribution cues, partisans are engaging in motivated directional reasoning which reaffirms their prior understanding of the economy (Bolsen et al. 2014; Nicholson 2011; Petersen et al. 2013). The positive/negative content of the story has a lessened effect in these conditions, suggesting that the cognitive effort demanded by motivated reasoning makes partisans less likely to internalize the new economic information contained in the story—even when the information is
congenial. In a concluding section, I discuss the implications of these findings for economic voting. The finding that partisans appear to digest ‘just the (congenial) facts’ indicates that agenda-setting may be a powerful tool used by partisan media to subtly influence the economic perceptions of citizens. Once partisans have engaged in selective exposure, they can be most strongly influenced by biases which are rooted in the ‘mere’ presentation of factual information, as opposed to overt cueing. While these reported economic perceptions may not reflect the full nature of partisans’ knowledge of the economy (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior et al. 2015), supplying partisans with cue-free economic data allows for partisans to report economic judgments which stray even further in the partisan direction.

**Party Cues and Partisan Attributions of Responsibility**

The vast literature on media effects has shown that both overt partisan cueing and agenda-setting are powerful tools used by media to influence the public opinions of citizens. A host of such studies has shown the tendency of some journalists to engage in selective, overtly partisan, and sometimes overly-negative presentations of economic indicators (Fogarty 2005; Nadeau et al. 1999, 2000; Broome 2006; Sanders and Gavin 2004; Shah et al. 1999; Hetherington 1996; Blood and Phillips 1995).² Findings of media bias in economic news conform with current theories of the profit motivation of ideological news sources: journalists use non-median appeals to capture niche audiences (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010).

Ideological media may therefore engage in overt partisan cueing efforts during opinion-laced presentations of factual economic indicators. Researchers have shown in many instances that this type of cueing effort is met with strong reactions from citizens, as emotional ‘hot cognitions’ overwhelm ‘cooler’ cognitive processes of information acquisition (Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006). Framing of news developments as specifically occurring due to the actions of
Republicans or Democrats has also been well-documented in qualitative studies of ideological news (e.g., Aday 2010). These partisan attributions of responsibility are currently receiving increased attention in the literature on economic voting, and qualitative assessments of ideological news networks have shown how journalists have explicitly connected the attribution of responsibility for poor economic conditions to partisan actors in recent years (Treas 2010).

When news stories include explicit partisan attributions, such as mentions of the Republican and Democratic parties and their most visible elites, strong shifts in the perceptions of partisans are expected to ensue. The desire to engage in partisan cheerleading in response to attribution cues can result in powerful opinion change.

Recently, scholars have endeavored to further understand how partisan cues affect the way citizens process information to form opinions (e.g., Bolsen et al. 2014; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Mondak 1993; Nicholson 2011, 2012; Petersen et al. 2013). Most recently, these studies have contended with the question of whether citizens interpret partisan content through the process of relatively cognitively-demanding directional motivated reasoning, or whether such cues represent cognitively cost-effective heuristics through which citizens may quickly and easily arrive at judgments. In their study of partisan cues, Petersen et al. (2013) randomly expose experimental subjects to a policy proposal, which is attributed to one of two Danish political parties. The study provides a direct test of the psychological mechanisms underpinning party cues, by measuring response latency as a proxy for cognitive processing effort. The results show consistent evidence that partisans exert greater processing effort in the face of party cues, suggesting that directional motivated reasoning is a common psychological response to cue exposure.

Partisan attribution cues are visible across a wide array of ideologically-motivated news outlets today, as efforts are made to connect economic developments (for the better or worse) to
the actions of the President and other partisan elites.⁶ These discussions of economic indicators, replete with attributions of responsibility, are expected to demand substantial cognitive processing effort. Not only must partisan viewers contend with the presentation of economic data, which is being interpreted via the tone of the language used to describe the development, but they must also devote substantial cognitive resources to the motivated interpretation of the partisan cue.

This opinionated presentation style is not the only way that citizens have received biased messages about economy since the global Economic Crisis of 2008. In many cases, partisan media report on the economy in a factual manner with a neutral political tone, devoid of any partisan attributions of responsibility. However, bias can also be achieved in this reporting style, through a subtler manipulation of the economic agenda.

**Selective Facts**

Despite relaxed space constraints in the current era of 24-hour news, it appears that when it comes to coverage of the economy, media nevertheless apply important constraints in terms of which indicators are most frequently mentioned (e.g., Groeling 2013). The economic agenda can be characterized by the selective presentation of specific economic indicators, such as unemployment, inflation, and the stock market. Partisan sources can utilize this selective presentation to the advantage of their preferred economic narrative, without resorting to overtly-opinionated discussions of partisan actors and their competency in managing the economy (Groeling and Kernell 1998; D’Alessio and Allen 2000; Larcinese et al. 2011).⁷

The economy is a complex engine, with an almost unknowable set of interrelated and constantly-moving parts. Across the postwar period, journalists have needed to rely on key information subsidies to easily and frequently describe the status of the economy to citizens.
Today, some ideologically-motivated journalists must work substantially harder (Patterson and Donsbagh, 1996). Instead of reaching for the most readily-available statistics to report and interpret, these groups seek to depict the economy solely by describing those indicators which are especially congenial to partisans at the time of reports. Journalists are not expected to fabricate the raw data of economic news stories—factual objectivity represents an ironclad norm in the world of journalism, and violation of these norms can merit backlash from the community (Mindich 2000). By selecting certain economic indicators to accord with partisan narratives, however, these same journalists may subtly shift the perceptions of those citizens who are seeking to receive such information.

As discussed above, the reception of economic information devoid of party cues is expected to be less cognitively demanding when compared to economic news stories which include partisan attribution cues. However, Republicans and Democrats are nevertheless expected to respond to positive and negative news stories very differently, as they compare the reports to an internal partisan narrative (the partisan “preferred world state”). Congenial selective facts therefore engage processes of motivated learning, in which partisans choose to accept this information because it accords with the way the world “ought to” function from the perspective of preconceived partisan beliefs (Jerit and Barabas, 2012). When media increase their level of coverage of congenial issues, learning about specific indicators is expected to increase. Citizens seeking out attitude-confirming information will readily internalize those facts which merely imply that a partisan has succeeded or failed in implementing their economic agenda due to the positive or negative nature of the economic news (Taber and Lodge 2006; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Weeks and Garrett 2014). Since the Great Recession of 2008-09, the economy continues to weigh heavily on the minds of partisans, suggesting that these perceptions may be especially susceptible to selective learning processes.
Reaching agreement on policy proposals is exponentially more difficult if partisans are supplied with starkly different information regarding the outcomes of existing policies. From the perspective of retrospective economic voting, incumbents cannot be consistently punished for economic hardship if partisan supporters only receive congenial economic information. However, journalists’ decisions to include or exclude partisan attribution cues alongside this information is expected to have consequences for the uptake of this new economic information.

**Expectations: Party Cues and Selective Facts**

Partisans balance competing desires to both learn new, credible information about recent economic developments, and to engage in partisan cheerleading. I argue that factual proattitudinal information *without* overt attribution cues will have the strongest effects on partisans in the economic realm. This is because the ‘mere’ presence of factual proattitudinal information provides partisans with a clear and simple way to easily internalize new (overwhelmingly congenial) facts. In comparison, the inclusion of overt partisan attributions of responsibility alongside economic information may actually *reduce* the ability of partisans to update their economic judgments—even in response to proattitudinal economic information. The strong effects of hot cognitions may overwhelm the uptake of new factual economic information, meaning that partisans will be be less likely to devote the factual content of the news to memory.

When learning about the economy from opinionated news stories which are replete with party cues, partisans may instead reaffirm their *preexisting* preferred world state narratives when asked to evaluate economic conditions. This means that both congenial and disconfirming information will have weaker effects on the perceptions of partisans when accompanied by party cues: already-biased judgments will not become substantially more biased. Exposure to both positive and negative news should instead result in very similar economic judgments, as in both cases,
partisans will simply reaffirm their preexisting partisan biases (without having been substantially influenced by the content of the economic information they recently consumed). Motivated directional reasoning, triggered by the mention of partisan actors, reduces the likelihood that polarized partisans internalize any new economic information.

A partisan media environment can therefore exacerbate polarization in economic perceptions merely by providing partisans with news stories containing easily-interpretable selective facts. Citizens’ perceptions will deviate from measures of the ‘real’ economy to a much greater degree when exposed to this objectively-presented congenial news, as citizens are able to quickly and efficiently devote this information to memory without needing to contend with the processing of overt cues. Partisans can readily interpret the tone of economic news stories in a partisan light, as many party identifiers are highly attuned to the political implications of economic fluctuations (Gerber and Huber 2010; Bullock et al. 2015). Credible, ‘just-the-facts’ information subsidies provided by partisan media therefore allow partisans an efficient avenue for the development of substantially more biased economic evaluations. Together, these expectations can be summarized as follows:

H1. In the presence of partisan attribution cues, partisans will reaffirm their prior beliefs, resulting in similar economic judgments regardless of the positive/negative tone of the news.

H2. Congenial economic information is expected to have a greater effect on partisans’ economic evaluations in the absence of partisan attribution cues than in the presence of partisan attribution cues.

Exposure to cue-free counterattitudinal (or ‘disconfirming’) economic information, in contrast, should not be used by partisans to update their economic perceptions due to cognitive dissonance (e.g., Clark et al. 2008). As this information conflicts with the internal partisan
narrative, partisans will be more likely to resist, ignore, or otherwise rationalize away this new information. As discussed above, when exposed to this information in tandem with opposing partisan opinion cues, partisans will also ignore the tone of the economic information and instead reaffirm their preexisting partisan narrative. The activation of partisan cues indicates to these respondents that the tone of economic information in these media messages has been reported for the purpose of partisan cheerleading by proponents of the outparty. In the absence of clear attribution cues, partisans simply resist the new economic information.

H3. Cue-free disconfirming economic information is not expected to have an effect on partisans’ economic evaluations.

**Methods & Data**

In order to trace the effects of party cues and congenial information on citizens’ economic perceptions, survey experiments were conducted as part of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. This Module was deployed in November of 2014, after the conclusion of the 2014 general election. The CCES reaches a national sample, stratified by state and district. The experimental treatments directly manipulate two factors: the positive-negative tone of the economic reports, and the degree to which reports are either simply factual or overtly-opinionated by way of partisan attribution cues. In addition to a control condition to facilitate comparisons, all four conditions were received by both Republican and Democratic respondents, resulting in a 2x2x2 experimental design.

Recently, survey experimental methods have been successfully employed by scholars in the field of economic voting to trace the effects of economic information on voting behavior. Simonovits (2015) utilizes an experimental design in which treatment conditions exposing subjects to positive and negative economic information are randomly assigned, in order to
evaluate the exogenous effects of economic perceptions on presidential approval. Similarly, Alt et al. (Forthcoming) randomly expose subjects to various treatment conditions containing factual economic news as reported by partisan and nonpartisan sources. While Simonovits’ (2015) experimental treatments present subjects with highly-credible source cues (the stories report on the consensus of economic ‘experts’), the latter study manipulates these source cues across varying levels of credibility (from the central bank, to partisan actors). The present study exposes participants to no source cues, but rather seeks to distinguish the effects of different types of biased information contained within the content of news reports. Thus, the present study differs from recent survey experiments in its explicit manipulation of the bias contained in the language of experimental treatments.

Participants

The original sample included 1,000 CCES module content participants. Political independents were excluded from the analysis in order to facilitate comparisons of participants with Republican and Democratic partisan proclivities. Excluded individuals were those expressing no partisan identity on a seven-point partisan scale. Individuals were also excluded if they expressed a partisan preference other than Republican or Democrat, or if they skipped the question. The resulting sample (N = 686) includes individuals who identify as strong partisans or partisan ‘leaners’ (those who initially report no party affiliation, but when pressed, indicate a partisan preference). 314 respondents identified as Republican in this subsample, while the Democratic group contained 372 respondents. The national sample was weighted according to the CCES’ module weighting scheme, to ensure demographic representativeness (See the Supplementary Materials for a full description of the sample demographics and for a comparative assessment of the representativeness of the sample). The Republicans and Democrats were substantially
different on a number of key demographics: Republicans in the sample are significantly older on average than the Democrats, and the Democrats are significantly more likely to be female. The Democrats were also more likely to be nonwhite.

Survey experiments offer a unique way to assess how aspects of the information environment impact perceptions, but they suffer from many potential drawbacks. In particular, a substantial issue in many survey experiments is the low external validity of experimental treatments purporting to measure media effects on public opinions in a highly artificial survey setting. To attempt to mitigate these important concerns, I employed several safeguards. At very the outset of the 2014 CCES module, respondents were first asked to “please read a short news article,” and then were randomly exposed to one of five news stories (the text of these experimental treatments is detailed below). Next, respondents were presented with a battery of questions and experimental manipulations (including text and images), which spanned a range of topics including religious denomination, biblical knowledge, gender identity issues and government spending. The variety of topics in this questionnaire therefore presents respondents with a fairly strong distractor task, which prevents subjects from being overexposed and from discovering the purpose of the experiment. After this question battery and the measurement of the dependent variable of interest, respondents completed the standard post-test CCES demographic profile. Questions asking respondents to indicate their partisanship were asked after the post-treatment question battery, to help reduce the unintentional activation of partisan identities.

Experimental Treatments & Expectations

Table 1 demonstrates the design of the experiment. In each randomized experimental treatment group, subjects are exposed to either positive or negative economic information.\textsuperscript{13} Within each of these positive/negative conditions, subjects could received cues strongly identifying Democratic
partisan actors as responsible for the development, or stories fully devoid of any partisan mentions. Among respondents receiving a positive story condition, the information is expected to be disconfirming to Republicans (since the preferred world state among Republicans is negative). This same positive story is correspondingly expected to be congenial to Democrats. In the negative condition, the story will be congenial to Republicans and disconfirming for Democrats. The control condition presents subjects with no new economic information, allowing for a baseline measurement of the pre-treatment economic evaluations of Democrats and Republicans.

[Table 1 about here]

The experimental treatments contained no mention of the news source, to avoid the potentially-confounding effects of source cueing. As seen in Table 2, in each story, the positive-negative tone was manipulated to provide either a partisan-congenial or a disconfirming message. Republicans receiving an upbeat story were coded as having received a ‘disconfirming’ story, while those receiving a negative story were coded as having received a ‘congenial’ message. The opposite was true for Democrats: the negative stories were coded as ‘disconfirming’, while the positive stories were ‘congenial’. The second variable manipulated in the stories was the intensity of partisan cueing. Two stories made explicit mentions of President Obama and the Democratic party, while the ‘factual’ stories in the design made no mentions of these partisan actors (instead referring to ‘economists’ as relevant actors wherever necessary).

[Table 2 about here]

The experimental treatments were created to invoke the stylistic differences between factual “indicator stories,” which rely heavily upon statistics, trends, and the viewpoints of economists, and opinion-based statements about specific economic developments. In the opinion-based stories subjects are not only exposed to strong positive-negative tone, but also explicit and pointed mentions of a salient partisan actor. Thus, the differences across treatment reflect stylistic
differences between these presentation modes which include variation in the presence of partisan cues.

The experiment was designed to make several comparisons within and across partisan groups. It may be that the strength of the reaction to party cues will vary according to partisanship, as all party cue stories include a mention of President Obama and Democrats. We might expect Republicans to react more strongly to these stories than Democrats: Nicholson’s (2012) study, for example, demonstrates that out-party cues have stronger effects than in-party cues. Because of this potential asymmetry, it is important to assess the effects of the treatments upon Republicans and Democrats separately. If we observe consistent patterns across both Republicans and Democrats, we will have evidence that the theoretical assumptions enumerated above seem to hold regardless of the in-party/out-party nature of the cue.

The dependent variable of interest is a standard five-point economic retrospection measure, asking respondents whether they rate economic developments as ‘much better’ (coded as 5), ‘better’, ‘about the same’, ‘worse’, or ‘much worse’ (coded as 1) than the situation one year ago. Expectations related to the treatment effects on these retrospections can be summarized in Table 3, which demonstrates the relevant treatment contrasts and the theoretical expectations regarding their direction.

In Table 3, we see that the primary expectation regarding the effect of ‘factual’ congenial treatments is that they will have the strongest effects on the economic evaluations of subjects. In addition, negative and positive stories which feature partisan attribution cues are also expected to exert some effects on partisans’ perceptions, consistent with the notion that we have activated partisan identities and encouraged partisans to reaffirm their preferred world state. When
disconfirming information is presented in absence of partisan attribution cues, we expect there to be no substantial effects on partisans’ economic perceptions.

Methods
As the experimental treatments are fully randomized, tests of the effects of the treatments constitute simple t-test comparisons between each treatment group and the control group. Tests of the statistical balance of the groups, on the basis of a number of relevant demographic characteristics, can be seen in the Supplementary Materials. These tests uniformly provide evidence in favor of the notion that the experimental groups are demographically balanced due to treatment randomization. Therefore, additional tests such as multivariate ordinal logistic regression models are not necessary (there is no need to control on covariates due to experimental balance).\(^{15}\) The results of such models, which hold constant a number of theoretically-relevant control variables (Evans and Andersen, 2006; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000), are fully robust to the results shown below (see the Supplementary Materials).

Experimental Results
The results of this experiment demonstrate clear differences in patterns of economic evaluations across treatments.\(^{16}\) We first see these patterns across both Republican and Democratic subjects, as shown below in Figure 1.\(^{17}\) On the far left-hand side, we see initial evidence of the powerful effects of partisanship across the control group: this is fully in keeping with the expectation that partisans maintain a baseline bias in economic evaluations (Bartels, 2002).\(^{18}\) A t-test comparison of Democrats and Republicans in the control condition indicates that without exposure to any new economic information, partisans report significantly different economic retrospections. The average untreated Republican had an economic evaluation of around 2.7 on the 5-point economic
retrospection battery, while the estimate for Democrats was was more positive, with an average evaluation around 3.3 ($p < 0.01$).

Exposure to the treatment conditions appears to shift the magnitude of this disparity. When scrutinizing the results of the experiment across Republicans and Democrats exposed to party cues (second leftmost and second rightmost columns), these shifts indicate strong evidence in favor of H1. It appears that in these overtly-opinionated conditions, partisans’ economic perceptions conform to nearly identical patterns. Looking across partisan groups, we see that the perceptions are somewhat more polarized than before: for Democrats, partisan attribution cueing in both positive and negative conditions results in mean evaluations of around 3.5, while Republicans are more pessimistic in both conditions (with mean evaluations around 2.5 in both cases). In neither case did Republicans or Democrats appear to consider the direction of the economic information to an appreciably different degree, providing suggestive evidence that citizens are reacting foremost to the party cue in these conditions.

Which treatments have the strongest effects on economic perceptions? While Fig. 1 provides a useful comparison of partisan groups, I next turn to a closer examination of treatment effects within each partisan group. Fig. 2 reports the mean values of the treatment groups among Republicans only, relative to Republicans who received the control condition. In the leftmost bar, we examine the assertion that ‘mere’ congenial agenda-setting will have the strongest effect on Republicans’ evaluations. The results, fully consistent with Table 3, demonstrate that the average Republican is expected to move from the control group estimate of around 2.7 points to an evaluation of around 2.2 points in response to the factual negative economic story ($\beta = -0.48$, 95% CI: [-0.83, -0.14]). The congenial information subsidy of negative economic news is eagerly utilized by Republican subjects to update their views on the past economy. However, in no other
condition does this negativity have a comparable effect. As discussed above, even when exposed to partisan attribution cues in addition to negative (congenial) economic information, the average Republican assumes only a slightly more negative opinion ($\beta = -0.19, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.52, 0.14]$). This shift is substantially smaller than in the no-cue condition (in addition to being statistically indistinguishable from zero). Republican subjects, then, exhibit evidence in support of H2.

[Figure 2 about here]

Regarding disconfirming information (summarized in the right panel of Fig. 2), we also see a pattern that conforms to our expectations. It appears that exposing Republicans to positive economic news (without party cues) has little effect on these subjects’ economic retrospections ($\beta = -0.11, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.44, 0.22]$). In addition, overtly mentioning President Obama as the champion of positive economic developments triggers Republicans to assume the position of their prior preferred-world state, and causes a small shift away from the negative tone of the story content ($\beta = -0.14, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.49, 0.21]$). The preliminary, bivariate results of the experiment for Republicans, then, appear to support the expectations summarized in Table 3. When exposed to ‘mere’ factually-congenial information, Republicans update their perceptions in a strongly negative direction, as we would expect for supporters of the party out of government. However, they are not as negative in their perceptions when Democrats are overtly referenced as the cause of this bad economic news. Finally, disconfirming information induces small proattitudinal shifts in economic perceptions relative to the control condition.

Next, we can consider how the results among Democrats inform H2 and H3. Fig. 3 shows similar, but not identical, results to those exhibited by Fig. 2. Compared to the pessimism of Republicans’ preferred world state, we can now assess the effects of the treatments among respondents whose partisan preferred world state involves a thriving economy under President Obama. Looking at the leftmost bar of Fig. 3, we can observe strong and significant effects in the
positive direction for the congenial treatment condition lacking partisan attribution cues ($\beta = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.01, 0.64]$). This can be contrasted with a diminished treatment effect in the congenial condition including partisan attribution cues ($\beta = 0.20, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.15, 0.55]$). While these results are not as stark as those among the Republican subsample, the treatments nevertheless provide evidence that the most influential type of congenial news story among Democrats is that which provides partisans with ‘just the (congenial) facts.’

[Figure 3 about here]

**Responding to Doom and Gloom?**

When considering disconfirming information for Democrats, we observe a pattern which provides evidence in partial conflict with our assumptions. It appears that Democrats provide somewhat more pessimistic interpretations of the economy when exposed to negative economic information (in the absence of party cues), even though this information is in conflict with the preferred world state of Democrats ($\beta = -0.21, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.53, 0.12]$). Negative factual information therefore appears capable of moving some Democrats away from their preferred partisan narrative, whereas exposing Republicans to positive information has no similar effect.

Research has shown that because of an instinctual drive to discover and avoid existential threats, humans are predisposed to exhibit greater arousal and recall when exposed to negativity in news stories (sometimes resulting in the dramatic “if it bleeds, it leads" style of journalism) (e.g., Ito et al. 1998; Grabe et al. 2003). For this reason, pessimistic economic news stories might be more strongly internalized by citizens across the partisan spectrum, when compared to more optimistic content. It is therefore also possible that even among Democrats rooting for positive economic developments as a consequence of their partisan preferred world state, negative news will still have some dampening effects on their optimistic perceptions due to the attention-
grabbing nature of doom-and-gloom economic reports. It is also therefore no surprise that across all the conditions in the experiment, the largest treatment effects are found among Republicans exposed to negative information.

When exposed to a pessimistic story blaming President Obama for economic malaise, Democrats react by moving in the opposite, proattitudinal (positive) direction—though not to a statistically significant degree ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI = [-0.16, 0.51]). Once again, we have observed evidence that in the presence of party cues, both Republicans and Democrats ignore the tone of stories, and instead move towards the reaffirmation of their prior belief (H1).

**Conclusions**

Taken together, these results support the notion that broadcasters’ economic agendas are consequential for the formation of partisan-tinted economic perceptions—especially in the absence of overt party cues. Economic indicators such as unemployment, which are relatively difficult to interpret, are often subject to both overt and more subtle forms of biased presentation. As both agenda-setting and party cueing appear to be occurring in contemporary news coverage (Larcinese et al. 2011), it is consequential to observe that both types of partisan coverage can result in more polarized economic perceptions among partisans (as evidenced by Fig. 1). However, the greatest effects on partisans’ economic perceptions are found when congenial economic news is presented without explicit attributions for economic performance to partisan actors.

The present findings consistently show that partisans are engaging in selective learning about congenial economic indicators, by internalizing information which resonates with preexisting opinions shared by their political ‘home team’. This selective learning, when combined with the effects of selective exposure, may strongly shape the perceptions of partisans. However, the
content of this news matters. As media fragmentation has increased, partisans are now able to engage in selective exposure to a greater degree than in previous years. Their preferred sources may occasionally make explicit reference to partisan actors, but on a day-to-day basis, congenial agenda-setting appears capable of exerting an even stronger and more consistent effect on economic perceptions.

In the context of the political debates around which these agendas are constructed, such biases can also be consequential for both economic voting behavior and levels of support for policies targeting economic inequality. Partisans learning about unemployment through sources which utilize congenial agenda-setting are likely to have also been highly critical of Democratic initiatives such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), largely because they were connected to the strong negative rhetoric used to discuss these economic developments. Other economic initiatives, especially issues surrounding taxation (Bartels 2005), are similarly connected to ‘doomsday’ scenarios involving the pessimistic presentation of difficult-to-interpret economic indicators. Biased economic perceptions can have wide-ranging effects on the ways partisans engage with politics, within and beyond the voting booth.

The present results consistently show that economic news has substantial effects on both Republicans and Democrats, though these results may be limited in their generalizability. One limitation in this vein is temporal. Not only are we unable to assess the duration of the treatment effects, but Presidential incumbency in this experiment also cannot vary. Research in political psychology has recently demonstrated that conservatives react more strongly than liberals to negative stimuli (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014). Given these asymmetries, it may be no surprise that Republicans are reacting to negative information more strongly than Democrats. If we were to replicate the experiment under the condition of a Republican Presidential incumbent, we would undoubtedly expect to see Republicans switch to a positive preferred world state regarding
economic conditions, while Democrats would likely construct a negative one. However, we cannot discount the possibility that pessimistic Democrats and optimistic Republicans would exhibit weakened reactions to the treatments, given that Republicans appear especially-likely to internalize negative, and not positive, information (and vice versa among Democrats). And as mentioned above, the external validity of survey experiments measuring media effects will always be at least partially limited by the relatively artificial conditions of the survey setting. Future work should therefore continue to examine economic news effects using a diverse array of research methods.

In addition, while these results have nevertheless bolstered our understanding of how media condition partisans’ economic perceptions, they cannot address the question of whether citizens’ economic ‘perceptions’ as reported on surveys are measuring partisans’ true beliefs about the state of the economy. Recent literature challenges this conventional notion of economic perceptions, instead proposing that citizens’ retrospections are driven largely by a desire to engage in insincere reporting of their factual appraisals (Bullock et al., 2015; Prior et al., 2015). Partisans may know the true state of the economy, but they will respond to survey questions in a partisan-tinted fashion merely because they seek to engage in cheerleading when given the opportunity by interviewers. When incentivized to provide ‘correct’ answers, more objective economic appraisals result.

Cue-free economic information seems to also provide partisans with an avenue to change the way in which they report economic information to survey scientists. Contrary to monetary incentivization to provide correct appraisals, subsidies of congenial information allow partisans to move further away from objectivity towards an even more congenial position. We cannot know whether partisans truly believe that the economy is stronger or weaker as a result of exposure to this information, however. It may be that congenial subsidies of cue-free information
update both the ‘true’ perception and the ‘expressive’ or ‘opinionated’ perception as reported on surveys. Or, it may be that such subsidies do not substantially alter the citizen’s ‘true’ perceptions of the economy, as these appraisals can be easily revised through passive information exposure and inference (Prior et al. 2015). Regardless of the effects of such news stories upon the sincere beliefs of partisans, I argue that ‘opinionated’ economic perceptions are nevertheless important for economic voting behavior. Partisans are clearly engaging in cheerleading before and after hearing the news. The extent to which this cheerleading leads to more extreme expressions of economic judgment, however, seem to be influenced by the content propagated through the contemporary media environment.
Author’s Note

Replication materials for the present analyses can be found at www.iananson.com/papers.

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Biographical Information

Ian G. Anson is an Assistant Professor in the political science department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His research interests include the study of American voting behavior, public opinion, media and politics, the politics of inequality, quantitative methods, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Dr. Anson received his Ph.D. from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, USA, under the supervision of Dr. Gerald C. Wright.
References


Figure 1: Mean Economic Evaluations By Party and Treatment

Note: Weighted N = 316 for Republicans; 378 for Democrats. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Intervals.
Figure 2: Republican Treatment Mean Contrasts vs. Republican Control Group

Note: Weighted $N = 316$ for Republicans. Horizontal line indicates control mean among Republicans only. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Intervals.
Figure 3: Democratic Treatment Mean Contrasts vs. Democratic Control Group

Note: Weighted N = 378 for Democrats. Horizontal line indicates control mean among Democrats only. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Intervals.
Table 1: Experimental Design: Congeniality and Party Cue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive Valence</th>
<th>Negative Valence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opinionated</td>
<td>Positive Info., Pro-Dem. Cue</td>
<td>Negative Info., Anti-Dem. Cue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Positive Factual Information</td>
<td>Negative Factual Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>No Economic Content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Full Text of Experimental Treatments

**Negative tone, partisan attribution cue**
Washington, DC—President Obama and many of the nation’s top economists entered 2014 predicting a breakout year for economic recovery. However, troubles in the employment figures indicate that there will be more economic difficulties confronting Americans and that several more years of mediocre growth lie ahead. With Democrats in the White House, unemployment may never fully recover to pre-crisis levels. The simple truth is that the U.S. job market and the country’s broader economy are now permanently downsized.

**Positive tone, partisan attribution cue**
Washington, DC—President Obama and many of the nation’s top economists entered 2014 predicting a breakout year for economic recovery. This time, the expectations and the actual data line up remarkably well. The new report from Bureau of Labor Statistics shows the U.S. economy added almost exactly the number of jobs economists expected. Thanks to the actions of the President, the overall unemployment rate is still at its lowest point since September 2008, more than six years ago.

**Negative tone, no partisan cue**
New York, NY—While stock reports continue to stay upbeat, new unemployment data has begun to worry many observers. The number of people who applied for unemployment benefits rose last week, reflecting the high number of layoffs taking place in the U.S. economy. Initial jobless claims climbed by 8,000 to 312,000 in the past week, the Labor Department said Thursday. Economists polled by MarketWatch expected claims to total 311,000 on a seasonally adjusted basis.

**Positive tone, no partisan cue**
New York, NY—While reports of stock market instability are beginning to worry many observers, new unemployment data has indicated reason for optimism. The number of people who applied for unemployment benefits fell last week, reflecting the low number of layoffs taking place in the U.S. economy. Initial jobless claims fell by 8,000 to 312,000 in the past week, the Labor Department said Thursday. Economists polled by MarketWatch expected claims to total 311,000 on a seasonally adjusted basis.

**Control**
Cupertino, CA—It didn’t get a ton of attention Monday, but Apple’s next mobile operating system means significant changes for how iPhone users send and receive messages. The text window in the next version of iMessage will contain a little microphone button. Users hold a finger down on the button, record a short audio or video message, and send it with the swipe of a finger – all without leaving the app. In this way, Apple is taking a page from WhatsApp, which also allows audio and video messages.
Table 3: Summary of Expected Treatment Effects on Partisans’ Economic Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Expected Opinion Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Information With Cue</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Information With Cue</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Factual Information</td>
<td>No Updating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Factual Information</td>
<td>Very Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Expected Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Information With Cue</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Information With Cue</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Factual Information</td>
<td>Very Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Factual Information</td>
<td>No Updating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix

Table 4: Linear Regression Models Predicting Economic Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pos. Tone, No Party Cue</strong></td>
<td>0.328*</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>0.328*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.159)</td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
<td>(0.159)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neg. Tone, No Party Cue</strong></td>
<td>-0.208</td>
<td>-0.483**</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.166)</td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
<td>(0.166)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pos. Tone, Party Cue</strong></td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
<td>0.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
<td>(0.178)</td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neg. Tone, Party Cue</strong></td>
<td>0.173</td>
<td>-0.189</td>
<td>0.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.170)</td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
<td>(0.170)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republican</strong></td>
<td>-0.622***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans: Pos. Tone, No Cue</strong></td>
<td>-0.438</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.232)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans: Neg. Tone, No Cue</strong></td>
<td>-0.275</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.243)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans: Pos. Tone, Cue</strong></td>
<td>-0.344</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.251)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans: Neg. Tone, Cue</strong></td>
<td>-0.362</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.240)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>3.340***</td>
<td>2.718***</td>
<td>3.340***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.118)</td>
<td>(0.121)</td>
<td>(0.118)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
<td>378</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R^2</strong></td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R^2</strong></td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residual Std. Error</strong></td>
<td>1.015 (df = 373)</td>
<td>1.016 (df = 311)</td>
<td>1.015 (df = 684)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F Statistic</strong></td>
<td>3.284* (df = 4; 373)</td>
<td>2.050 (df = 4; 311)</td>
<td>17.890*** (df = 9; 684)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

### Notes

1. See Healy and Malhotra (2013) for a comprehensive review.
2. While some have devised highly sophisticated modeling techniques to explore the recursive relationship between public opinion and economic news, occasionally using such models to argue that economic news accurately reflects public perceptions (Shah et al. 1999; Wu et al. 2002), recent studies have maintained the assumption of a unidirectional, ‘top-down’ causal

3 A renewed interest in responsibility attributions has recently emerged, which builds on the pioneering work of Rudolph (2003) and Peffley (1984) to explore conditions under which partisans’ responsibility attributions are more or less polarized (e.g., Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Bisgaard 2015).

4 One issue addressed by Bisgaard (2015) concerns the potential that attributions of responsibility can vary over time: partisans will shift their attributions in response to incontrovertibly good or bad economic conditions. When partisan cheerleading is impossible to reconcile with the undeniably positive/negative state of current economic performance, ‘bias finds a way’: partisans simply shift their attributions to blame different actors for the conditions, consistent with their preferred world state. While this experiment cannot measure these potential shifts in responsibility attribution, the study was conducted during a time frame of high economic uncertainty. In the present analysis we would expect economic perceptions to remain polarized, while attributions of responsibility for economic conditions remain focused upon partisan actors.

5 While much of the literature contends with source cues, and not partisan attributions of responsibility, such economic attributions can also be considered in these terms.

6 For example, commentators like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Bret Baier decried the Obama administration’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in February of 2009, connecting this development to further harm to the already-decimated labor market (Hannity 2012). Fox News’ coverage of unemployment in these transcripts exhibits both partisan-congenial facts, and very strong partisan cues which take the form of responsibility attributions (“Barack Obama promised you...”).

7 This presentation of selective facts has been documented across national contexts. Of note, Larcinese et al. (2011) examine the relationship between U.S. newspapers’ history of partisan editorial endorsements and their agenda-setting behavior. The authors demonstrate evidence that in the case of unemployment, negative stories are presented significantly less frequently when the incumbent President shares a party identification with the newspaper’s endorsements.

8 The foundational R-A-S theory of Zaller (1992) describes reception as the first critical stage in information acquisition.

9 While we can conceptualize selective exposure as an unwillingness to receive information from an out-party source (Stroud 2010), partisans also decide whether accept or reject information based upon the content of the message. Though some scholars focus explicitly on partisan source cues (e.g., Mondak 1993), information devoid of source cues can also be accepted or rejected by partisan audiences on the basis of source-neutral partisan cueing.

10 Some partisans may actually go so far as to reject congenial economic information if it is presented alongside partisan attribution cues, as this overtly-biased content may signal to readers that the story is likely too opinionated to be factually accurate.

11 The choice to include ‘leaners’ as partisans is based upon the assumption that these ‘leaners’ often behave similarly to so-called committed partisans (e.g., Petrocik 2009). However, this is a strong assumption. As a check on the results presented in the following sections, I performed the same statistical analyses with partisan leaners excluded (Democratic N = 306, Republican N = 223). The results of these additional checks demonstrate that the findings in this study are fully robust to the inclusion or exclusion of partisan leaners.

12 Weighted N for Democrats is 378; 316 for Republicans.
See the Appendix for an indication of demographic balance across the randomized experimental treatments. We see evidence that on key demographics, the five groups in Table 1 were all statistically similar on variables such as age, gender, race, and education.

Results of a fully-interactive model are included in the Supplementary Materials.

In the experimental results presented below, I treat the five-point economic retrospection scale as continuous. This is a tenuous assumption given the ordinal nature of the data. Ordinal logistic regression models were robust to the findings presented below, so for the ease of interpretation, I provide the results of the linear model below.

See the Appendix for tabular regression results.

This experiment includes Democratic and Republican ‘leaners’ in the partisan category. The results are robust to the exclusion of these individuals. See the Supplementary Materials for a means table supporting Fig. 1, which also provides estimates of the difference between average Republican and Democratic economic retrospections in each treatment condition.

An alternative interpretation is that, due to the political nature of the CCES, respondents’ partisan identities have been already cued. While we have reason to believe from the results of non-political surveys and related literature that contemporary partisans are consistently polarized in their economic perceptions, the context of the CCES may nevertheless have exacerbated this polarization somewhat. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the estimation of treatment effects should not be affected by this phenomenon, because they are being explicitly compared to this (polarized) control group.

These reversals are well-documented in the economic voting literature (e.g. Bartels 2002).