

# Is the Government to Blame? An Experimental Test of How Partisanship Shapes Perceptions of Performance and Responsibility

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*The idea that voters use elections to hold governments to account for their performance lies at the heart of democratic theory, and countless studies have shown that economic performance can predict support for incumbents. Nonetheless recent work has challenged this simple link between policy performance and party choice by arguing that any relationship is conditioned by prior political beliefs, notably partisanship. Some have argued that economic perceptions are shaped by party choice rather than vice versa. Others have claimed that voters tend to attribute responsibility for perceived successes to their favored party, but absolve them of responsibility if performance is poor. This study examines the effect of partisanship on both performance evaluations and responsibility attributions using survey experiments to disentangle the complex causal relationships. Our findings show that partisan loyalties have pervasive effects on responsibility attributions, but somewhat weaker effects on evaluations of performance.*

The idea of holding politicians to account for their decisions is one of the cornerstones of democracy, and one of the most discussed and tested ideas in political science. Millions of words have been expended on setting out how and when governments suffer from poor policy performance or benefit from good policy performance at elections. The vast majority of this work has focused on how economic performance influences vote choices (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) and Nannestad and Paldam (1994) for good overviews). One key assumption of this literature is that voters blame governments for bad things happening, and credit governments for good things happening. That is, they attribute the responsibility for changes, good or bad, to the influence of elected officials.

This claim of a clear link between policy performance and vote choices has increasingly been called into question, however. First, an extensive body of work has shown that complex institutional structures, such as coalition and divided government, blur lines of responsibility and make it difficult for voters to hold governments to account (Anderson 2000; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka et al.

2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999). These studies argue that clarity of responsibility conditions the extent to which voters can sanction governments on the basis of economic outcomes. Second, scholars have raised questions about how individuals make their voting decisions, and particularly how prior political beliefs, such as partisanship, shape the link between policy evaluations and vote choices. Some “revisionists” have argued that party choice shapes economic evaluations rather than vice versa (Evans and Andersen, 2006; Johnston et al. 2005; Wilcox and Wlezien 1996; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997), claiming that the causal arrow runs in the opposite direction to that posited in the classic economic voting model. Others have argued that attributing responsibility to governments is a vital mediator between perceptions of economic performance and vote choice and have focused on how these attributions are shaped by partisanship (Gomez and Wilson 2003; Marsh and Tilley 2010; Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Rudolph and Grant 2002). Whereas in the former approach people resolve any potential conflicts between prior political beliefs and outcomes by changing their perceptions of facts (e.g., economic conditions),

this latter approach suggests voters attribute responsibility for these outcomes selectively. What both sets of arguments have in common, however, is their claim that partisanship acts as a “perceptual screen” that influences how voters reconcile information about policy outcomes with political choices. Yet the literature has tended to treat these processes separately, and thus provides little insight into which of these mechanisms is more prevalent. In this paper we extend that existing literature in several ways. First, we examine the effect of partisanship on both performance evaluations and responsibility attributions; testing to what extent voters are using their preexisting partisanship to inform both their evaluations of changes to the economy and also their views of who is responsible for those changes. Second, we go beyond the exclusive focus on the economy and examine the link between performance evaluations and attribution for healthcare policy as well. Finally, we adopt a novel methodological approach by using survey experiments to disentangle the complex causal relationship between partisanship, performance and attribution. These internet-based experiments were conducted in Britain, but the findings can be generalized to a broader setting.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on electoral accountability and economic voting. Second, we discuss how partisanship colors interpretations of performance and responsibility and outline our hypotheses. Third, we present our experimental design and then discuss our findings. Our results weakly support the classic idea of a partisan “perceptual screen” that biases voters’ views of policy outcomes, but we find stronger support for attribution of responsibility as a way of reconciling partisan feelings with objective information about policy performance. The final section discusses the implications of our findings for understanding the processes of democratic accountability.

## Selective Sanctioning

In the classic tradition of democratic theory, which understands elections as mechanisms of political accountability, elections are inherently a sanctioning device by which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Manin 1997; Powell 2000). This reward-punishment model suggests that voters reelect incumbents who have performed well, but oust those who have performed badly (Key 1966; Kramer 1971). In the empirical literature, this model has primarily

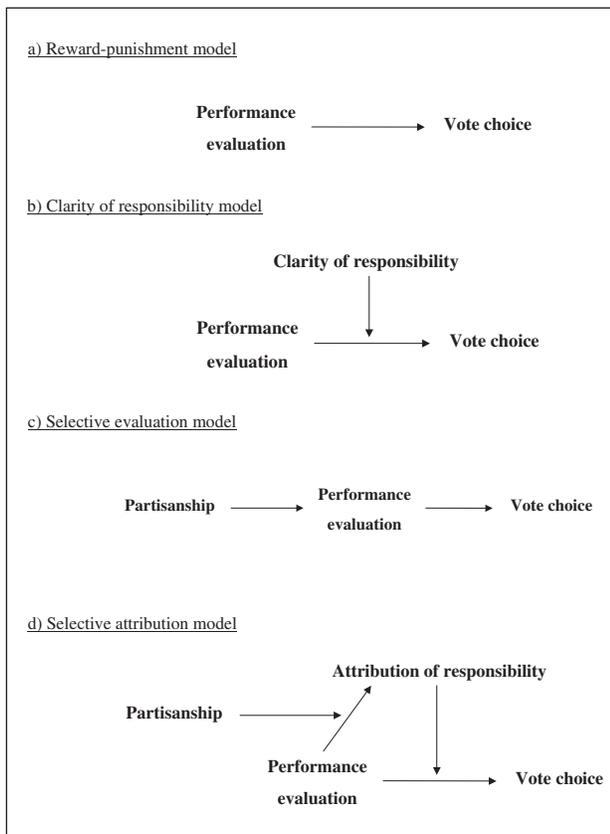
been applied to performance in the economic arena; voters observe fluctuations in the economy, attribute responsibility for these fluctuations to the incumbent government and vote accordingly.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1a depicts this simple reward-punishment model.

Empirically, a huge variety of studies have shown that economic indicators, objective and subjective, account for much of the variance in government support (Anderson 1995; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck 1988; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Nannestad and Paldam 1994). But while there is plenty of evidence suggesting a relationship between economics and election results, the strength and nature of this relationship appear to vary. Voters respond to different economic indicators at different times, and the link is stronger in some countries than others. Some have argued that a key reason for the differences lies in the ease with which voters can attribute responsibility for policy outcomes. In other words, “clarity of responsibility” is a key mediator between performance and vote choices, as shown in Figure 1b. Numerous studies have focused on how the institutional set-up affects the boundaries of responsibility and therefore the strength of economic voting. An influential article by Powell and Whitten (1993) demonstrated that elections in countries where responsibility is most easily focused on a single government party are more likely to follow the reward-punishment model. Follow-up work using cross-national data has supported the more general claim that economic voting is less prevalent when governments are weak and divided (e.g., minority and coalition governments) and legislatures are strong (e.g., strong committees and bicameral opposition; Anderson 2000; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Whitten and Palmer 1999).

This “clarity of responsibility” extension to the simple reward-punishment model focuses on context-level differences, but increasing attention has been paid to variation in how individual voters perceive the economy and attribute responsibility. A number of recent studies have moved the focus from a heterogeneous sanctioning process at the country-level to the individual level and have criticized the naïve portrayal of voters’ judgments in the early literature. As Rudolph notes, “the classical reward-punishment model portrays voters as myopic automatons whose support for

<sup>1</sup>More recent work has proposed an alternative ‘selection model’ where voters’ perceptions of the economy form the basis for assessing competence (Duch and Stevenson 2008). This model assumes that voters use economic performance to select the best candidate not to sanction the incumbent; nonetheless the empirical implications of the two models are similar.

FIGURE 1 Models of Electoral Accountability



the president's party rises and falls with economic performance" (2003, 699). Rather than responding automatically to changes in the economic climate, it is argued that voters' evaluations and judgments are conditioned by their prior political beliefs, primarily their partisanship. Voters do not simply respond to the facts and sanction accordingly, but rather seek to reconcile the facts with their political predispositions.

There are two ways of reconciling predispositions and facts in the process of holding governments to account: voters can either change how they view the policy performance (*selective evaluation*) or change who they hold responsible for the policy performance (*selective attribution*). According to the selective evaluation model, shown in Figure 1c, people's perceptions of policy performance are shaped by their political orientation, notably partisanship (Anderson, Mendes, and Tverdova 2004; Evans and Andersen 2006; Ladner and Wlezien 2007; Tilley, Garry, and Bold et al. 2008; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997). This approach thus challenges the existing economic literature by arguing that the strong relationship

between economic evaluations and vote choice "has been much overstated" since "popular incumbent parties carry with them an inbuilt bias among the electorate to perceive their economic performance in a more positive light than might otherwise be the case" (Evans and Andersen 2006, 203, 205). This recent debate has raised clear concerns about the general endogeneity of partisanship, electoral choices, and evaluations of the economy and has provoked a number of responses that apparently show only weak causal links between partisanship and economic evaluations (Lewis-Beck 2006; Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias 2008).

In contrast to the selective evaluation approach, the selective attribution approach does not argue that voters necessarily hold biased views about actual policy performance, but rather that voters engage in group-serving attribution bias: they attribute perceived successes to their favored party and attribute perceived failures to parties they oppose (Pettigrew 1979; Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Rudolph and Grant 2002). In other words, instead of partisanship influencing perceptions of policy outcomes directly, partisanship influences voters' perception of who is responsible for the outcomes. This is depicted in Figure 1d, where the direct arrow from partisanship to performance evaluation in Figure 1c is replaced by an interactive relationship. Here partisanship conditions the effect performance evaluations on attribution, which in turn conditions the strength of the relationship between performance evaluations and vote choice. According to the selective evaluation approach, voters alter their performance evaluations to resolve conflicts between outcomes and partisanship, but according to the selective attribution approach the effect of performance evaluations on responsibility attributions is conditioned by partisanship. Whereas these two approaches are treated quite separately in the literature, they are based on a similar notion of partisanship as a filter through which the political (and economic) reality is assessed.

## Partisan Perceptions

The idea that partisanship is a way for voters to make sense of the political world is not new. In *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) described partisanship as the "unmoved mover" that drives attitudes towards elected politicians, policies and the achievements or failures of governments. As Campbell et al. note:

[P]arty has a profound influence across the full range of political objects to which the individual voter responds. The strength of relationship between party identification and the dimensions of partisan attitude suggests that responses to each element of national politics are deeply affected by the individual's enduring partisan attachments. (1960, 128)

Although Campbell et al. concentrate on how partisanship affects policy opinions, the idea of partisanship coloring evaluations of performance (valence issues) has also been very influential. In their study of opinions on the Iraq war, Gaines et al. (2007a) outline different mechanisms through which partisanship influence evaluations. First, there may be a simple refusal to update beliefs in the face of new information, second there might be a different interpretation of the same information and finally, the opinions that those interpretations generate might differ. These mechanisms of partisan bias can also be applied to economic performance evaluations, particularly sociotropic evaluations. First, partisans may either disregard unfavorable information on economic growth if their party is in government or embrace that same information if their party is not in government. This is perhaps the simplest way of thinking about how partisanship may affect economic evaluations. A recent study by Gerber and Huber (2009) lends support to this interpretation by showing that actual economic behavior is consistent with patterns of partisan differences in economic evaluations. Second, one could imagine that government partisans might have a similar view of the rate of economic growth as opposition partisans, it is simply that they are happier with that rate and more willing to interpret that as "good" economic performance than opposition partisans. Both views are consistent with the selective evaluation model, outlined in Figure 1c. In fact, in the burgeoning literature on the links between economic outcomes and partisanship, this distinction between beliefs and interpretation is rarely made. The third mechanism of partisan influence is the connection between the interpretation of beliefs about the world and the generation of opinions about the world; or more particularly, the question of how to allocate credit and blame for good or bad evaluations. In that case, government and opposition partisans may form similar interpretations of economic outcomes, but they find different actors responsible for those outcomes. This is selective attribution as outlined in Figure 1d.

There is a large literature in social psychology on the subject of attribution (see Fiske and Taylor 2007, chap. 6, for an overview). The attribution process involves seeking explanations for events and behaviors, motivated not only by a desire to understand and

predict events, but also a need to protect or enhance one's self-concept and self-esteem (Shaver 1975). This leads to self-serving attribution bias, where people tend to accept credit for success and deny responsibility for failure. The self-serving bias also operates at the group level (Brewer and Brown, 1998). Group-serving bias refers to the tendency of ingroup members to attribute positive actions committed by their own group to positive ingroup qualities and negative actions by the favored group to external causes (Hewstone 1989; Pettigrew 1979). This ingroup bias has been found in a number of contexts, and in the political science literature studies have shown how partisanship influences attribution (Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Campbell et al. 1960; Feldman 1982; Peffley 1984; Peffley and Williams 1985). Recent work by Rudolph has shown not only that attribution is an important mediator of economic evaluations in predicting vote choices (Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Rudolph and Grant 2002), but that partisanship is an important predictor of who is thought responsible for the economy in the first place (Rudolph 2003a, 2006). These results are echoed by other work that looks at the economy and public services in Britain and Ireland (Marsh and Tilley 2010), the influence of partisanship on attribution in systems of multilevel governance (Arceneaux 2004; Cutler 2004, 2008), and most recently work that focuses on who was thought responsible for the failure of the immediate response to Hurricane Katrina in 2008 (Gomez and Wilson 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). In all these cases, it is argued that partisanship has a great deal of influence over people's judgments of responsibility. In some cases, these effects are exacerbated, or ameliorated, by other intervening variables such as media exposure or political sophistication, but ultimately it is partisanship that drives attributions.

These recent studies provide a much more nuanced understanding of how partisanship influences the link between performance and political choices. Yet, some issues still call for further attention. First, none of these studies of attribution compare the different ways in which partisanship may mediate the link between performance and vote choices. Put differently, we do not know whether selective evaluation or selective attribution is the more powerful mechanism. Second, nearly all these works are based on cross-sectional data, and this makes it difficult to fully test casual relationships. This is important, as it has been argued that partisanship is not in fact an "unmoved mover" but rather a "running tally" of continuous updating of evaluations of outcomes, candidate qualities (Fiorina 1977, 1981). Hence, for Fiorina

and others partisanship is caused by evaluations and is not a cause of evaluations (Achen 1992; Fiorina 1981; Markus and Converse 1979).

Cross-sectional data cannot resolve these issues with regard to either the relationship between partisanship and evaluations, or the more complex situation of partisanship, evaluations, and attributions. Surprisingly few studies have employed an experimental design to unpack this relationship. In that sense, there is little work that employs a research design that explicitly models causal relationships by providing stimuli and measuring participants' reactions to those stimuli. Moreover the existing experimental studies that do exist look only at the role of attribution and not evaluation, tend to use small undergraduate populations<sup>2</sup> and focus almost exclusively on evaluations of the economy (Rudolph 2006; Shields and Goidel 1998).<sup>3</sup> This focus on selective attribution may be partly due to the fact that we cannot randomly assign people a partisanship and then ask them to evaluate the economy. In our experiment we get around the problem of assigning partisanship to test its effect on evaluation by providing information on responsibility and seeing how that shifts evaluations for different partisans. Similarly, we also provide information on evaluations and see how that shifts attributions of responsibility. The experimental design of the selective evaluation and selective attribution mechanisms are shown in Figure 2. Figure 2a presents the experimental test of the selective evaluation model, where we vary information on who is responsible (first column) to assess the effect on policy evaluations. Our expectation is that respondents' policy evaluations are moderated by partisanship. Figure 2b shows the test of the selective attribution model, where we vary the information given to respondents on policy outcomes (first column) to assess the effect on attribution of responsibility. We expect that the effect on respondents' views of who is responsible will be moderated by their partisanship. This design therefore enables us to compare the magnitude of the two effects, something which previous work has failed to do. The exper-

imental design is described in greater detail below. First, we outline the key hypotheses that will be tested using this design.

## Hypotheses

Below we outline three sets of testable hypotheses. The first relate to the selective evaluation model as in Figure 2a. The basic idea is that partisanship colors evaluations. As a consequence people will adjust their view of how well or badly things are going when faced with evidence about who is responsible for a particular policy area.

- H1.* Giving people information on the extent of responsibility of government for a policy area will affect how they think it has changed, *dependent* on their partisanship. Specifically:
- a. Government partisans will think changes are more positive when government is thought responsible, compared to when government is not thought responsible.
  - b. Opposition partisans will think changes are more negative when government is thought responsible, compared to when government is not thought responsible.

The second set of hypotheses examines the extent of selective attribution as in Figure 2b, that is whether voters change who they think is responsible when faced with evidence that a policy area is going well or badly.

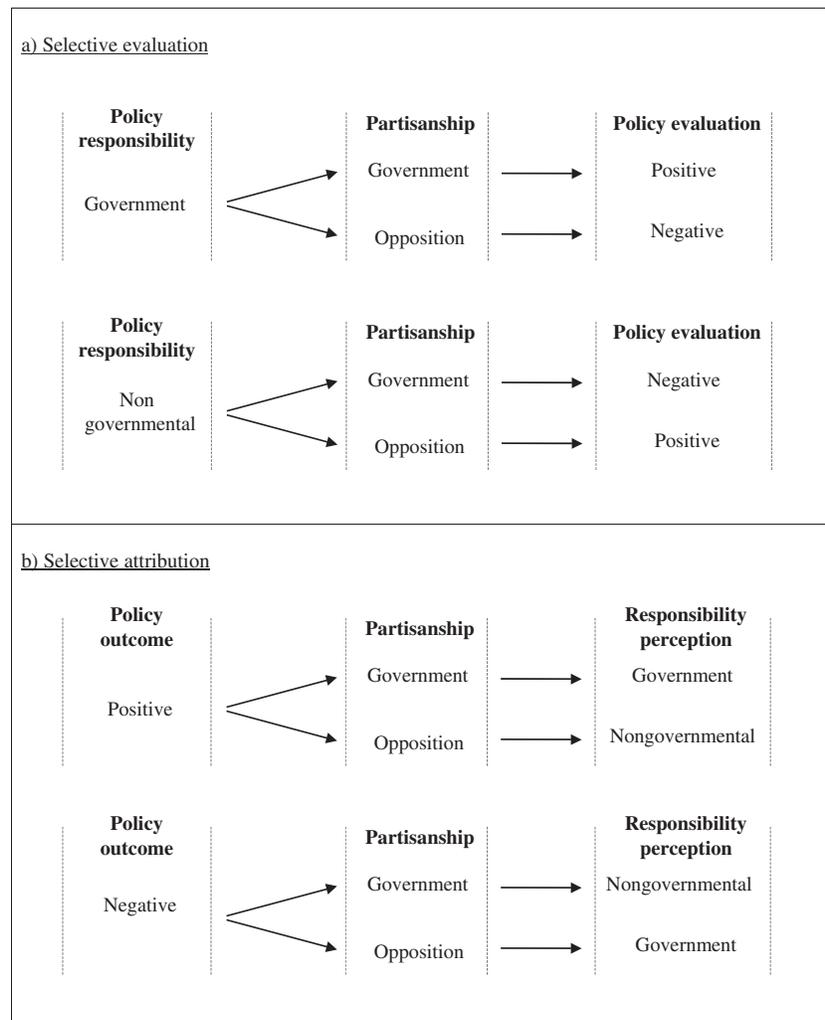
- H2.* Giving people information on negative or positive changes to a policy area will affect who they think is responsible for that area, *dependent* on their partisanship. Specifically:
- a. Government partisans will attribute less responsibility to the government when confronted with negative changes compared to positive changes.
  - b. Opposition partisans will attribute more responsibility to the government when confronted with negative changes compared to positive changes.

Finally, we expect that the effect on responsibility attributions when we provide information about outcomes will vary across different types of individuals. In line with previous research, we expect these effects to be moderated by political sophistication. The experimental literature has shown that treatment frames containing factual information have a greater effect on more knowledgeable people, because such people are likely to comprehend the considerations presented in a treatment and be capable of integrating them in their utility calculation (Chong and

<sup>2</sup>An exception is the study by Hellwig, Ringsmuth, and Freeman (2008), which examines U.S. citizens' perceptions of governments' "room to manoeuvre" in the global economy, using a survey experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample.

<sup>3</sup>In fact both studies are concerned with explicit partisan cues, and participants are given information that is linked to a particular party. This is a stronger stimulus than we use here.

FIGURE 2 Selective Sanctioning: An Experimental Test



Druckman 2007; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). As Chong and Druckman note “knowledge enhances framing effects because it increases the likelihood that the considerations emphasized in a frame will be available or comprehensible to the individual” (2007, 112). This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H3.* Political sophisticates will be more likely to respond to new evidence about performance and responsibility through processes of selective evaluation and selective attribution than people with less political sophistication. Specifically:
- When presented with new information on responsibility, sophisticated partisans are more likely to change their evaluation of performance compared to less sophisticated partisans.
  - When presented with new information on performance, sophisticated partisans are more likely

to change their attribution of responsibility compared to less sophisticated partisans.

## The Experimental Design

To test these propositions we use a randomized experimental posttest design in a mass survey context. There are several advantages to using survey experiments to examine our hypotheses. First, the experimental method allows us to design and control the information that individuals are exposed to. By conducting several experiments with different groups of subjects, we are able to compare the effects of partisanship on selective evaluation and selective attribution. Second, experiments enable us to make clear causal predictions through random assignment of information to respondents. As discussed above,

most of the previous work on the link between performance, attribution and evaluation has relied on cross-sectional data, which makes it very difficult to establish causal ordering. Moreover although studies using panel data have been useful in trying to unpick some of these causal relationships (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias 2008; Marsh and Tilley 2010), this work has largely ignored attributions of responsibility, and also has specific problems associated with it. Not least the often large (usually annual) time-lags between measurements that make measuring change in individuals' attitudes and beliefs quite difficult. Finally, our survey experiments, unlike most laboratory experiments, were carried out using a representative sample of the population, and hence they allow us to draw more accurate inferences about real-world opinion formation processes (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). One of the criticisms leveled against experimental research is that the external validity is low. Our population is a cross-section of society, not a group of university (and often political science) students, and moreover, our treatments have been designed to not explicitly cue partisan reactions as we simply mention "the government" or nonpolitical actors. Our experiments were carried out in Britain, which provides an apposite political context because of the high levels of clarity of responsibility and clear division between government and opposition produced by the Westminster system of powerful single-party governments (Powell 2000; Powell and Whitten 1993). In such a setting, we would expect selective attribution would be less prominent than in settings where lines of responsibility are blurred. Finally, rather than simply looking at one policy area, we replicate our tests with two policy areas, the economy and healthcare.

Our experimental design, shown in Figure 2 along with our expectations, consists of four separate experiments using four nonoverlapping groups of participants (i.e., respondents did not participate in more than one experiment). In the first two experiments (Figure 2a) we provide information on who is responsible for health and the economy separately and then assess how this information affects people's view of outcomes (*selective evaluation*). The second two experiments (Figure 2b) provide information on policy outcomes, again for health and the economy separately, and then examine the effect this has on attribution of responsibility (*selective attribution*). Each of the experiments was conducted in January 2009 using a sample of around 1,500–2,000 individuals who are representative of the British population over the

age of 18.<sup>4</sup> Every group received a standard question about their partisanship early on in the omnibus online survey that allows us to divide the sample into government partisans (Labour identifiers; slightly over a quarter of respondents) and opposition partisans (Conservative, Liberal Democrat, nationalist and other party identifiers; around half of respondents). We exclude any nonpartisans from further analysis.<sup>5</sup>

For the first experiment, in which we provide information on responsibility for the economy, the sample is split into three. Our treatment consists of different statements about who is responsible for the economy attributed to experts, followed by a standard question (on a 5-point scale) on their views on economic changes over the last year. The first group is told the government is responsible, the second group that the government is not responsible and the third control group is given no extra information. The exact wordings are as below:

#### 1. Responsibility for the economy treatment

##### *Group 1a (government responsible):*

Experts say that changes in national economic conditions are largely driven by actions taken by the British government. In your opinion, how have economic conditions in Britain changed over the last year?

[Economic conditions have got (1) a lot better, (2) a little better, (3) stayed the same, (4) a little worse, (5) a lot worse.]

##### *Group 1b (government not responsible):*

Experts say that changes in national economic conditions are largely driven by global changes. In your opinion, how have economic conditions in Britain changed over the last year?

<sup>4</sup>The sample was recruited by YouGov, Britain's leading internet survey company, and it is representative of the British population by sex, region, age, partisanship and social class. YouGov uses a methodology similar to that employed by Harris Interactive in the United States, and respondents to our surveys were selected randomly from an online research panel of over 250,000 adults living in the United Kingdom. YouGov uses sophisticated recruitment and weighting schemes in efforts to offset sampling biases and offers modest financial incentives to bolster response rates, which are comparable to face-to-face surveys in the United Kingdom. Across our nonoverlapping surveys, response rates were just over 50%. A recent study comparing YouGov surveys with the British Election Study showed only small differences in the distributions of key explanatory variables in models of turnout and party choice (Sanders et al. 2007).

<sup>5</sup>The question used takes the standard format of "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?, with respondents given response categories of Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, other, none of them or don't know. Nonpartisans make up slightly under a quarter of the respondents.

*Group 1c (control):*

In your opinion, how have economic conditions in Britain changed over the last year?

We carried out a similar experiment with another set of participants giving information on responsibility for changes in healthcare:

## 2. Responsibility for the healthcare treatment

*Group 2a (government responsible):*

Experts say that changes in the standard of healthcare are largely driven by actions taken by the British government. In your opinion, how has the standard of healthcare in Britain changed over the last year?

[The standard of healthcare has got (1) a lot better, (2) a little better, (3) stayed the same, (4) a little worse, (5) a lot worse.]

*Group 2b (government not responsible):*

Experts say that changes in the standard of healthcare are largely driven by the development of new drugs and treatments. In your opinion, how has the standard of healthcare in Britain changed over the last year?

*Group 2c (control):*

In your opinion, how has the standard of healthcare in Britain changed over the last year?

These first two experiments therefore enable us to test hypothesis 1, that partisanship drives evaluations (*selective evaluation*). The next two experiments test whether partisanship mediates the effect of new information about policy outcomes on who is thought responsible for that outcome (*selective attribution*). Our treatment here consists of different statements about changes in the economy attributed to experts (positive, negative and no information for the control group), followed by a question on how responsible the British government is for the economy, with respondents asked to locate the degree of responsibility that the government has for the economy on an 11-point scale. It is important to note that our treatment involves a comparative assessment of the change in the economic conditions (the U.K. economy compared to other countries). This comparative aspect was included since a positive statement about the state of the economy in the midst of a severe economic crisis would not have seemed credible to respondents. It is also not unusual in the economic voting literature to consider economic performance in comparison to other countries (see e.g., Powell and Whitten 1993, 392). We replicate this experiment focusing on healthcare provision rather than the economy (but without the comparison to other countries). The exact wordings are below:

## 3. Economic performance treatment

*Group 3a (negative information on the economy):*

Experts say that not only have economic conditions deteriorated a lot over the last year, but the British economy is doing considerably worse than most other countries. How responsible would you say the British government is for economic conditions in Britain?

[0-10 scale provided to respondents with 0 marked as not responsible at all and 10 is completely responsible]

*Group 3b (positive information on the economy):*

Experts say that although economic conditions have deteriorated a lot over the last year, the British economy is doing considerably better than most other countries. How responsible would you say the British government is for economic conditions in Britain?

*Group 3c (control):*

How responsible would you say the British government is for economic conditions in Britain?

## 4. Healthcare performance treatment

*Group 4a (negative information on healthcare):*

Experts say that healthcare in Britain has generally worsened over the last year; for example, the incidence of superbugs (MRSA) in hospitals has increased as have inequalities in healthcare. How responsible would you say the British government is for the standard of healthcare in Britain?

[0-10 scale provided to respondents with 0 marked as not responsible at all and 10 is completely responsible]

*Group 4b (positive information on healthcare):*

Experts say that healthcare in Britain has generally improved over the last year; for example, hospital waiting times have gone down and life expectancy has increased. How responsible would you say the British government is for the standard of healthcare in Britain?

*Group 4c (control):*

How responsible would you say the British government is for the standard of healthcare in Britain?

## Evaluation, Partisanship, and Attribution

Before we turn to the analysis of the treatment effects, we first examine the association between partisanship, attribution and evaluation. The data clearly indicate a strong relationship between partisanship and both performance evaluation and attribution. Table 1 below shows the mean scores (on the 1–5 scale, this is

**TABLE 1 Evaluations of Economic Conditions and Healthcare by Partisanship**

	Mean economy evaluation score (N)	Mean healthcare evaluation score (N)
Government partisan	1.25 (151)	3.27 (132)
Opposition partisan	1.17 (270)	2.67 (248)
Difference	0.08 <sup>†</sup>	0.60**

*Note:* The dependent variable is evaluation measured on a 1–5 scale, where 1 = got a lot worse over the last 12 months and 5 = got a lot better over the last 12 months. Data from control groups 1c and 2c only.

<sup>†</sup>p < .10 \*p < .05 \*\* p < .01.

reversed from the question wording with 5 now coded as best and 1 as worst) for economic and health evaluations, from the control groups (1c and 2c) who were given no extra information on economic and health attributions. Table 2 shows the mean scores (on the 0–10 scale, with 10 as completely responsible and 0 not at all responsible) for economic and health attributions for the control groups (3c and 4c), who were given no extra information on outcomes.

What is clear from both these tables is that on the economy people generally thought things were going badly compared to a year ago, which is fairly unsurprising given the state of the British, and world, economy in January 2009. What is more noteworthy is that government partisans compared to opposition partisans are slightly more likely to give a positive view of the economic situation and much more likely to think that the government is not responsible for the economy. This latter difference is quite substantial: there is over a 1½ point difference between government and opposition partisans. For health, the picture is more mixed. Government partisans clearly give

**TABLE 2 Attribution of Responsibility to the Government for Economic Conditions and Healthcare by Partisanship**

	Mean economy attribution score (N)	Mean healthcare attribution score (N)
Government partisan	6.65 (217)	8.26 (198)
Opposition partisan	8.20 (372)	7.78 (358)
Difference	–1.55**	0.48*

*Note:* The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility, measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. Data from control groups 3c and 4c only.

<sup>†</sup>p < .10 \*p < .05 \*\* p < .01.

more positive evaluations of healthcare than opposition partisans (scoring over one-half a point higher on the 1–5 scale), but as might be expected there is no consensus over the direction of change. This has an impact on how partisanship is correlated with attribution of responsibility. For the economy, we know that the vast majority of people will sensibly think things have got worse, and depending on their partisanship this may then impact on who they think is responsible. As there is no consensus view on whether healthcare has improved or not, it is not surprising that we do not find a particularly strong pattern of attribution of responsibility by partisanship.

Overall Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the possible ways in which partisanship, evaluation and attribution are correlated. The causal ordering of those correlations is much less clear though. With only cross-sectional data we do not know to what extent the evaluations and attributions are exogenous from partisanship and causing party choices, or to what extent they are themselves simply a product of party choices. This is where our experimental set-up can help. Our first set of experiments tests the selective evaluation model, as we provide voters with information on who is responsible and then see how this affects evaluations by partisanship. The expectation is that if government partisans are told the government is responsible, they will have more positive evaluations than if told that the government is not responsible. Table 3 shows the results, with two OLS regressions<sup>6</sup> separately predicting evaluation of the changes for the economy and healthcare (on a 1–5 scale, with 5 as most positive), with independent variables of treatment (a dummy variable indicating that government is not responsible relative to government being responsible), partisanship (a dummy variable indicating opposition partisanship relative to government partisanship) and an interaction between treatment and partisanship. If Hypothesis 1 is correct then we should expect that the interaction term is positive and statistically significant. This would mean that opposition partisans' evaluations become rosier relative to government partisans when told the government is not responsible for the policy area.

Interestingly, we find mixed evidence when testing the selective evaluation model. The effect of the responsibility treatment on economic evaluations is significantly conditioned by partisanship. Telling government partisans that the government is primarily

<sup>6</sup>As the dependent variable is a 5-point scale, we have replicated these regression analyses with ordered probit models. The results, both in terms of substance and statistical significance, are very similar. Full tables are shown in the online appendix.

**TABLE 3 Selective Evaluation OLS Models for the Economy and Healthcare**

	Economy		Healthcare	
	B	SE	B	SE
Treatment (govt not responsible)	-0.13 <sup>†</sup>	0.08	0.28*	0.13
Party ID (opposition partisan)	-0.32**	0.07	-0.64**	0.11
Treatment*Party ID	0.22*	0.10	0.13	0.16
Constant	1.48**	0.05	3.17**	0.09
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03		0.08	
N	815		793	

Note: The dependent variable is evaluation measured on a 1–5 scale, where 1 = got a lot worse over the last 12 months and 5 = got a lot better over the last 12 months. Reference group for treatment = Government responsible. Reference group for party ID = Government partisan.

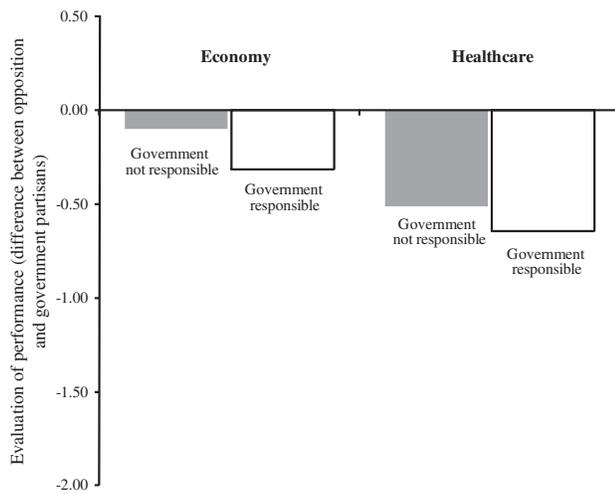
<sup>†</sup>p < .10 \*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

responsible for the economy makes them slightly more likely to think that there has been an improvement in economic conditions, compared to opposition partisans who downgrade their perceptions of economic performance when given information that the government is responsible. By contrast, we find no conditioning effect of partisanship on the response to the responsibility treatment on healthcare evaluations: government and opposition partisans respond in a similar manner. Hence, there is mixed support for selective evaluation, with only weak effects for the economy, but what of selective attribution?

Table 4 shows two OLS regressions predicting the economy and health attribution scores (on the 0–10 scale) for respondents, with the two independent dummy variables for treatment (positive performance information compared to the reference category of negative performance information) and partisanship (opposition partisanship compared to the reference category of government partisanship), and the interaction between the two. Again it is the interaction between the two that is of interest, as this shows the degree to which opposition partisans are reacting differently to government partisans when presented with information on economic and healthcare outcomes. Here we see a clear impact of the experimental treatment for both policy areas. In both cases, opposition partisans attribute more responsibility to the government when faced with negative performance information than when faced with positive performance information, and government

partisans attribute more responsibility to the government when given positive performance information than when given negative performance information. The differences between the two partisan groups in their reaction to the treatment, as measured by the interaction term, are statistically significant at the 1% level for both areas, and seem of a relatively sizable magnitude. Figures 3 and 4 below illustrate the size of the treatment effects for both selective evaluation and selective attribution. Figure 3 shows the difference between government and opposition partisans in their evaluation of the economy and healthcare, by treatment. As we would expect all these differences are negative, that is opposition partisans give lower evaluation scores to the government than government partisans regardless of treatment. This is unsurprising. More interestingly, we can also see that our treatment (telling people who is responsible) has a rather small effect on these differences, and as noted only a statistically significant one in the case of the economy. Opposition partisans score 0.1 points lower than government partisans on the 1–5 economy evaluation scale when told the government is not responsible, compared to 0.3 points lower when told the government is responsible. This picture of little impact of treatment on evaluations contrasts with the quite sizable impact of treatment on attributions as shown in Figure 4 however.

Figure 4 shows the difference between opposition and government partisans in the degree to which they found the government responsible for the economy and healthcare by treatment group. This means for the economy, regardless of treatment, the differences are all positive: opposition partisans always hold the government more responsible for the economic situation than government partisans as the situation at the beginning of 2009 was fairly dire and this was obvious to all voters. Nonetheless we still see quite large effects of treatment (information about policy performance). Opposition partisans score 1.4 points higher than government partisans on the 0–10 attribution scale when given positive information about the economy, but score 2.2 points higher when given negative economic information. Extra negative information means that opposition partisans are more likely to hold the government responsible. There is an even more noticeable effect for healthcare. When given negative information here opposition partisans are more likely to hold the government responsible than government partisans, but when given positive information opposition partisans are less likely to hold the government responsible than government partisans.

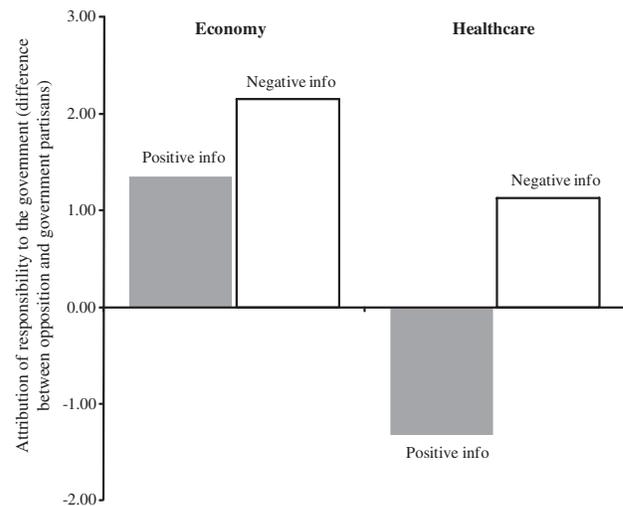
**FIGURE 3 Selective Evaluation Effects for the Economy and Healthcare**

*Note:* Figures estimated from Table 3. Size of the bars is the difference between opposition and government partisans' evaluation (1–5 scale) of the economy/ healthcare (positive numbers indicate the evaluations of opposition partisans are better than the evaluations of government partisans). The dark bars represent a treatment of information suggesting that the government is not responsible for the economy/ healthcare, the light bars represent a treatment of information suggesting that the government is responsible for the economy/ healthcare.

Overall, it is clear that both parts of Hypothesis 2 are strongly supported. Selective attribution thus seems to have a real effect: altering who voters think is responsible appears to help them resolve the incongruity between their partisanship and information about changes in the real world. There is less support for our first hypothesis of selective evaluation; although at least for the economy, people seem partially willing to adjust their evaluations in line with their partisanship given information on who is responsible.

### Political Interest and Partisanship as a Perceptual Screen

This interpretation of the results is also supported by the differences in how more politically sophisticated participants bring their opinions into line with one another. As discussed earlier, we would anticipate greater effects for people who are more engaged in the political process, due to both more psychological need for congruence of opinions, and a greater ability to integrate new information (Hypothesis 3). If this is

**FIGURE 4 Selective Attribution Effects for the Economy and Healthcare**

*Note:* Figures estimated from Table 4. Size of the bars is the difference between opposition and government partisans' attribution of responsibility to the government (0–10 scale) for the economy/ healthcare (positive numbers indicate opposition partisans attribute more responsibility to the government than government partisans). The dark bars represent a treatment of positive information about the performance of the economy/ healthcare, the light bars represent a treatment of negative information about the performance of the economy/ healthcare.

the case, then we should expect to see larger effects of our treatments for individuals that are more politically sophisticated. In fact this is what we see, but only for people bringing their judgments of responsibility into line with outcomes, not for people bringing their views of outcomes into line with who is responsible. We measure political sophistication using a standard question on political interest: “How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics? A great deal, quite a lot, some, not very much/ none at all?” We treat this item as an interval level variable (recoded in the opposite direction to make a 1–4 scale, with high values indicating high levels of interest), and model attributions, or evaluations, again using OLS regression, given the main effects of partisanship, treatment and political interest, all two-way interactions and the three-way interaction between partisanship, treatment, and interest. If attributions or evaluations are affected by the extra information differentially by sophistication, in particular if political sophisticates are engaging in greater perceptual screening than people with less political interest, then this three-way interaction should be statistically significant.

**TABLE 4** Selective Attribution OLS Models for the Economy and Healthcare

	Economy		Healthcare	
	B	SE	B	SE
Treatment (positive performance)	0.02	0.25	0.71**	0.23
Party ID (opposition partisan)	2.15**	0.22	1.13**	0.21
Treatment*Party ID	-0.80**	0.30	-2.45**	0.30
Constant	6.38**	0.18	7.41**	0.16
R <sup>2</sup>	0.12		0.08	
N	1108		1048	

Note: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility, measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. Reference group for treatment = Negative performance. Reference group for party ID = Government partisan.

†p < .10 \*p < .05 \*\* p < .01

In fact these three-way interactions are not statistically significant when predicting evaluations. That is, there is no evidence that sophistication matters in how partisanship mediates the impact of new information about responsibility on evaluations.<sup>7</sup> When predicting attributions however, the three-way interaction between partisanship, treatment and sophistication is statistically significant for both the economy (at the 10% level, p-value = 0.08) and healthcare (at the 5% level, p-value = 0.04) treatments. The magnitude of these effects is not trivial either.

Figure 5 shows the difference between government and opposition partisans in how they respond to extra information about economic and health outcomes, separately for those with high levels of political interest and those with low levels of political interest. Thus Figure 5 is effectively a replication of Figure 4, but taking into account political interest. Here we plot the predicted differences between the two partisan groups by treatment for people with low levels of political interest (that score 1 on our scale), and for people with high levels of political interest (that score 4 on our scale). As can be seen, political interest has a strong and expected effect. The treatment makes little difference to the difference between government and opposition partisans for the politically uninterested, but has a large effect on that difference for the politically interested. As we hypothesized, the latter bring their attributions of responsibility into line with economic and health performance to a much greater

degree than the politically uninterested. Indeed the effects of the economy treatment for the uninterested group are essentially zero.

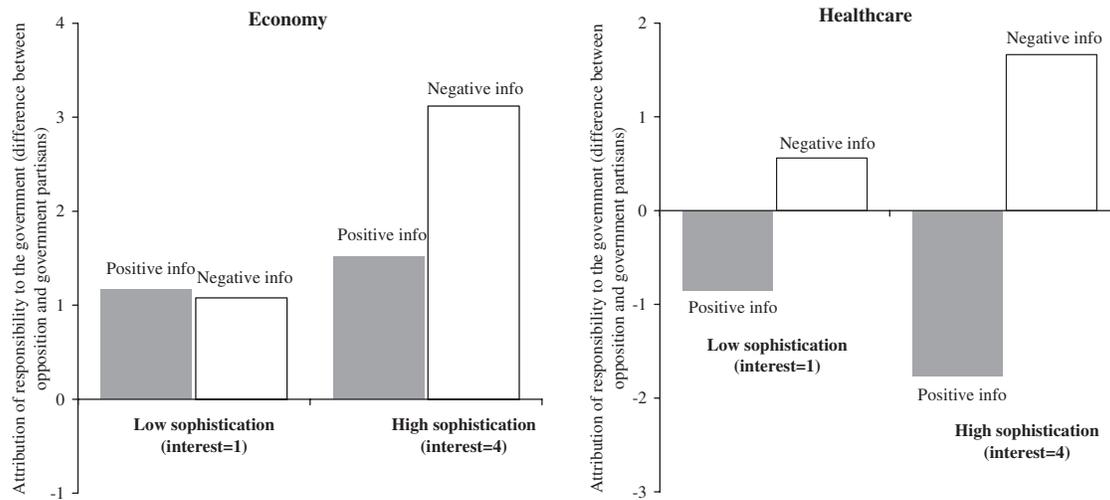
## Discussion

This study represents the first attempt to test the relationship between partisanship, performance evaluations and attributions using experimental data. Our aim has been to disentangle and compare the different ways in which partisanship mediates the relationship between policy performance and electoral outcomes. This relationship is central to the idea of electoral accountability, and hence it is important to understand how prior political beliefs condition the way in which citizens sanction politicians. In order to properly examine these complex causal relationships, we have conducted a set of innovative survey experiments. The survey experiment design is ideal for this purpose, because it allows us to make clear causal inferences through random assignment of subjects to treatments combined with the representativeness, and thus generalizability, of the survey method.

We examined two ways in which voters can resolve the incongruity between their partisanship and real-world conditions. They can either ignore the objective conditions and adjust their evaluations in line with their partisanship (selective evaluation) or they can, more subtly perhaps, adjust who they think is responsible for the objective conditions according to whether these conditions are good or bad, based on their partisanship (selective attribution). In the latter case, if conditions are improving then opposition partisans attribute this change to circumstance, if conditions are worsening then government partisans choose similarly to blame circumstance and not their party. As discussed, our findings lend some support to both mechanisms, uniquely, however, our experimental design also allows us to think a little about the relative strength of the two mechanisms of partisan bias, and, interestingly, we find stronger empirical support for the selective attribution mechanism than the selective evaluation mechanism. There is only a selective evaluation effect for the economy, whereas there is a selective attribution effect for both the economy and healthcare. Insofar as we can compare the magnitude of the effects, the treatment effects seem larger for selective attribution. Finally, we only find an interaction with political sophistication for selective attribution. So although there is some evidence to suggest that people let their

<sup>7</sup>Full details of the models can be found in the online appendix (Tables A1 and A2).

FIGURE 5 Selective Attribution Effects for the Economy and Healthcare by Political Interest



*Note:* The size of the bars is the difference between opposition and government partisans' attribution of responsibility (0–10 scale) to the government for the economy/ healthcare (positive numbers indicate opposition partisans attribute more responsibility to the government than government partisans). The dark bars represent a treatment of positive information about the performance of the economy/ healthcare, the light bars represent a treatment of negative information about the performance of the economy/ healthcare.

partisanship color their perceptions of factual conditions, it does seem that people are less willing to adjust their evaluations in line with their partisanship given information on who is responsible than to adjust who they think is responsible when given information on outcomes. This has potentially important implications for the existing literature, as it suggests that perceptions of objective conditions may not be simply an artifact of partisan bias. Nonetheless the implications of this study's findings for the idea of democratic accountability remain rather unsettling for it is clear that, regardless of how people may adjust their perceptions of what has happened, voters do adjust their views of who is responsible in line with their partisanship. Although government partisans may acknowledge that the economy is in crisis, they also appear ready to absolve the government of responsibility for that crisis.

These findings also raise an additional question, which cannot be fully addressed within this study, namely how selective attribution may vary across different institutional settings. In many ways, the British context is a good one in which to assess the extent of selective attribution, because governments are both single party and extremely institutionally powerful and therefore the British political system is characterized by a high degree of clarity of responsibility. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that it is fairly

difficult for voters to disassociate outcomes from government actions in Britain and that the use of selective attribution would be even more prominent in other systems where lines of responsibility are murkier due to coalition governments and the separation of powers. This remains merely informed speculation however, and it is as yet unclear how partisan biases in attribution may depend on the institutional context. Is it easier for voters to use selective attribution in cases when the lines of responsibility are relatively clear, such as the British case, or where they are blurred? This remains a question for future research.

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