

A Broken Public? Americans' Responses to the Great Recession

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Abstract

Did Americans respond to the recent Great Recession by demanding that government provide policy solutions to rising income insecurity, an expectation of state-of-the-art theorizing on the dynamics of mass opinion? Or did the recession erode support for government activism, in line with alternative scholarship pointing to economic factors having the reverse effect? We find that public support for government social programs declined sharply between 2008 and 2010, yet both fixed-effects and repeated survey analyses suggest economic change had little impact on policy-attitude formation. What accounts for these surprising developments? We consider alternative microfoundations emphasizing the importance of prior beliefs and biases to the formation of policy attitudes. Analyzing the General Social Surveys panel, our results suggest political partisanship has been central. Gallup and Evaluations of Government and Society surveys provide further evidence against the potentially confounding scenario of government overreach, in which federal programs adopted during the recession and the Obama presidency propelled voters away from government. We note implications for theoretical models of opinion formation, as well as directions for partisanship scholarship and interdisciplinary research on the Great Recession.

Keywords

attitude formation, heuristics and biases, partisanship, policy change, Great Recession

Do Americans respond to economic crises by demanding that government take action and provide policy solutions? This expectation has been common among journalists, political commentators, historians, and analysts of public opinion. Classical scholarship undergirding this expectation in U.S. politics points to the impact of the Great Depression in laying the foundations for the New Deal: in the face of a worldwide economic crisis, state-building initiatives and powerful social movements from below combined to make liberalism the dominant public philosophy for the next generation (Brinkley 2003; Starr 2007). Looking beyond the New Deal, opinion researchers found evidence that trends in public attitudes tend to follow the business cycle,

with high unemployment often fueling support for welfare spending and government expansion (Page and Shapiro 1992; Schlozman et al. 2005).

These expectations have been given a rigorous new grounding in the widely debated and influential Macro Polity Theory (MPT) of the U.S. political economy (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002a; MacKuen,

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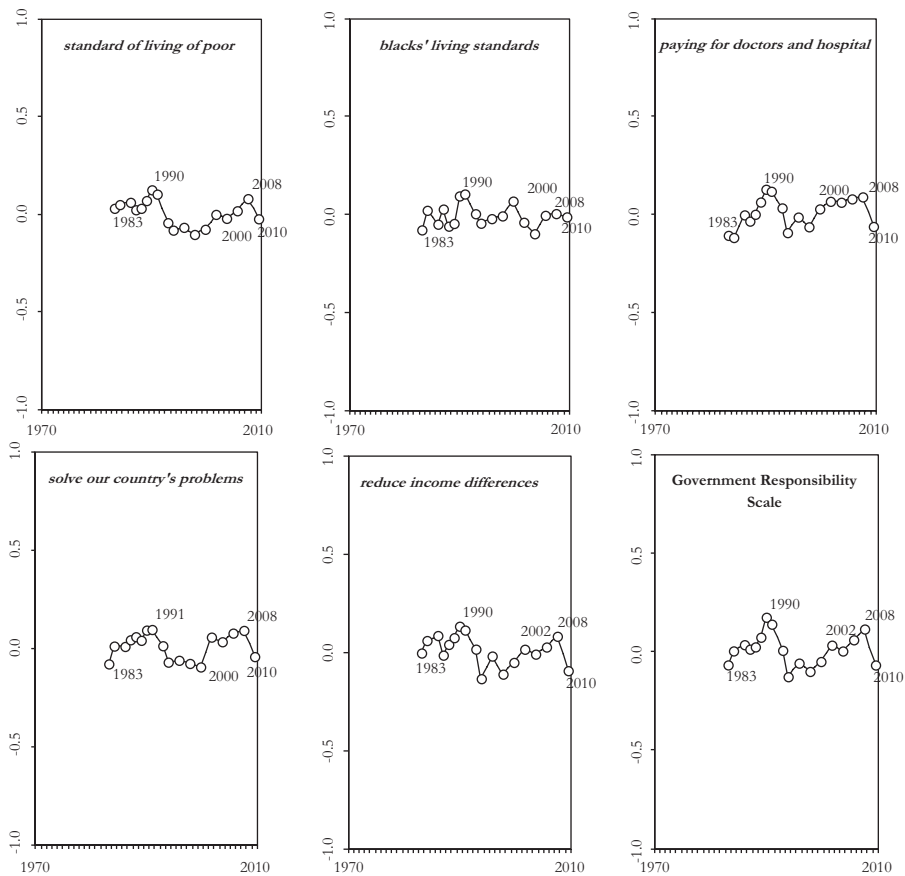


Figure 1. Aggregate Opinion Trends – Specific Government Responsibility Items and Scale
Note: Charts' y-axes defined by ± 1 sd (higher scores indicate greater preference for government responsibility).

Source: General Social Surveys data (Smith et al. 2011).

Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Stimson 2004; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). According to MPT, the public responds rapidly to both macroeconomic and policy change. Citizens prefer less spending and regulation in times of prosperity, but they turn away from unregulated markets and demand more government in times of economic downturn and rising unemployment. For their part, policymakers and elected officials respond predictably to these shifts in mass policy preferences, seeking to avoid voter reprisal in the next election. Opinion and policy move in cycles shaped by recent policy development and the macroeconomic context: if policy moves too far in one direction, public backlash is inevitable. According to MPT, there is

more than contingency at work as regards the interrelationship between economic change, mass preference formation, and the trajectory of public policy. These are interactive elements within a larger system.¹ U.S. institutions are organized to protect against economic threats to median voter well-being, while simultaneously guarding against government indifference or overreach.

Did the largest postwar economic calamity—the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 and the slow recovery since then—propel the U.S. public toward greater preference for government, in line with conventional scholarly wisdom and MPT? General Social Survey (GSS) data in Figure 1 provide perspective. Charts show opinion trends on government

responsibility within five domains, and a sixth presents scale scores summarizing responses (see Table A1 in the Appendix for question wording). Items are standardized; higher scores indicate greater preference for government.

In Figure 1's charts, change in attitudes between 2008 and 2010 was extensive yet moved in the *wrong* direction, at least as regards conventional expectations and MPT. This resonates with findings of other recent studies.² Rather than the recession stimulating new public demands for government, Americans gravitated toward lower support for government responsibility for social and economic problems.³ The 2008 to 2010 trend is among the largest in Figure 1's data, placing 2010 views of government responsibility at a level matching the lowest points of earlier decades.

What accounts for this surprising trend in Americans' policy opinions during the Great Recession?⁴ That question provides our point of departure. We also take up a second hypothesis suggested by MPT and scholarship on opinion responsiveness to policy change (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010): that the establishment of new policies tends to push mass preferences in the opposite direction. This scenario is plausible in light of new laws and policies adopted during the recession era, starting with the bailout of Wall Street banks in October of 2008.

A full understanding of the mechanics of public responses to the Great Recession takes us beyond MPT and economy-centered approaches to mechanisms. In particular, social psychology scholars have long identified symbolic beliefs as powerfully shaping the attitude-formation process. This is connected to the interdisciplinary tradition of heuristics and biases, where noneconomic factors occupy center stage in explaining departures from economic rationality. We consider three specific factors (stratification beliefs, partisanship, and racial attitudes) as candidates to explain the public turn away from government responsibility in the recession era.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS AND POLICY-ATTITUDE FORMATION

Well before the Great Recession, scholars of elections and public opinion unearthed considerable evidence regarding the political impacts of economic crises. U.S. presidents whose administrations coincide with periods of economic downturn are at risk of losing re-election, and the sitting president's party tends to be punished in midterm elections (Fair 1978; Hibbs 2006). When scholars used time-series data to launch investigations beyond the U. S. context, they found powerful effects of macroeconomic performance on incumbent party chances in Europe and Latin America (Lewis-Beck 1988; Remmer 1993; Tucker 2006). So strong were these effects that scholars worked to understand why election outcomes could be predicted before campaigns had even begun (Gelman and King 1993; Wlezien and Erikson 2002).⁵

Moving beyond elections, public opinion scholars developed detailed studies of the impact of economic conditions on trends in citizens' policy attitudes. Page and Shapiro's (1992:339) agenda-setting *The Rational Public* analyzed the entire available inventory of survey-based attitude measures, concluding that "ups and downs in the economy have often clearly affected attitudes about taxes and spending policies. . . . Recessions and high unemployment have increased support for domestic welfare spending." More than a decade later, Schlozman and colleagues (2005:23) summarized the established view of how economic change shapes mass policy preferences: "Economic downturns tend to produce more egalitarian sentiments, and extra sacrifices are sought from the affluent during major wars."

There was, it should be emphasized, an alternative view emerging alongside the established scholarly wisdom. According to this perspective, periods of economic expansion (and low unemployment) tend to stimulate public support for government activism

in the United States (Durr 1993). Stevenson's (2001) analysis of 14 Western democracies provides comparative evidence of a similar pattern for a lengthy time period, stretching from 1955 to 1988. This work thus differs as to the sign of the interrelationship between economic and public opinion change, but not the expectation that economic change influences public attitudes. On the eve of the Great Recession, there was accordingly considerable agreement that macroeconomic conditions had the potential to substantially redirect citizens' policy preferences.

Aggregation and Rational Expectations

Macro Polity Theory is a scholarly milestone, providing since the mid-1990s a key point of research and debate on interrelationships of mass opinion, public policy, and economic change (Kelly and Enns 2010; Manza, Cook, and Page 2002; Shapiro 2011; cf. McCall 2013). MPT provides detailed, theoretical foundations for the established view that economic downturns stimulate preferences for government, and periods of economic growth propel the public in the opposite direction. Not only are economic cycles expected to shape elections and voter preferences, they do so because of incentives and rationality built into the larger system.

Two assumptions are central to MPT scholarship. First, it is in the *aggregate* that policy preferences among citizens are coherent and consistently influenced by the economy. This is because MPT acknowledges and builds closely from research documenting limits in cognitive capacities and information among individuals.⁶ These common conditions often lead to unstable or nonexistent policy preferences among individuals; the MPT innovation is to focus on preference-formation processes in the aggregate (Stimson 2004). Aggregation is powerful because it sweeps away nonattitudes, guessing in surveys, and individuals' low attentiveness. In essence, aggregation leaves only the (latent) fraction of the public that possesses information

about economic events (and other relevant environmental stimuli) and has the capacity to process such information.

The noise-cancelling properties of aggregation enable a second key assumption. Here, voters and the public as a whole are *rational*, calculating expected utility and making forecasts using available information to gauge their degree of preference for government action. All this occurs at the aggregate level of preference formation, where such conditions as inattention, cognitive incapacity, or bias are again assumed to cancel out and leave intact the rationally responsive core of public opinion.

Underlying these assumptions are theoretical ideas from neoclassical economics. Lucas and Sargent's (1981) work on rational expectations is key, and MPT scholarship fully incorporates this theory transfer (Erikson et al. 2002a; see also MacKuen et al. 1992). In rational expectations scholarship, policymakers and the public use available information and are *prospective* in their calculations. According to rational expectations, this gives the public the capacity to accurately anticipate such economic outcomes as rising inflation or unemployment, in turn deterring (rational) policymakers from pursuing government policies that would exacerbate conditions. As a result, interactions between the public and politicians are said to mimic full information, suggesting a nearly optimal system (Stimson 2004).

This view of aggregate policy-attitude formation as a rational and forward-looking process confers new energy and a foundation to scholarly expectations that economic conditions matter. The electorate's informed and rational core moves rapidly to adjust to newly available information about threats or opportunities posed by the business cycle. These trends continually pull aggregate policy attitudes in new, yet predictable, directions. "Nimble" and "orderly" are evocative terms used by MPT scholars to capture the constantly adjusting yet predictable nature of policy-opinion formation (Erikson et al. 2002a:xviii, 6).

Opinion/Policy Linkage and the Government Overreach Scenario

In conceptualizing the U.S. political economy as a system (Erikson et al. 2002a: chapter 10), MPT identifies a further link between the process of opinion formation and the making of public policy. Due to fears of voter sanctions in elections, policymakers have considerable incentive to incorporate information about voter preferences into legislative behavior *prior* to elections (Burstein 2003; Stimson et al. 1995). This leads to the phenomenon of direct policy responsiveness, where politicians attend to, and incorporate in their legislative behavior, major shifts in mass opinion toward government (Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 2009). Political entrepreneurs promote laws or policies that will be popular with voters and avoid those that risk push-back. In the aggregate, politicians too are expected to be rational in responding to the public's preferences.

Interrelationships between policy-attitude formation and economic and policy change, combined with policymakers' tendency to respond to opinion change, are at the center of MPT. They enable its considerable insights and systematic theorizing concerning the empirical operation of U.S. democracy. As regards economic downturns, expectations are clear. Under conditions of crisis, the public as a whole should move rapidly (and rationally) to demand government action to address new threats to welfare. The systems-level argument ultimately *requires* this, unless additional signals attenuate or displace the expected impacts of economic change.

Here, MPT scholarship explicitly identifies a candidate: changes in policy and government activity. This is the flip-side of the systems-level interaction between mass opinion and public policy. Not only do politicians as a whole attend to aggregate shifts in mass preferences, so too is the public responsive to changes in the national government's legislative and policy output (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson et al. 1995; Wlezien 1995). Indeed, because government activity is a factor in citizens' welfare, it is rational for the public to respond in this fashion. As with voters' processing of

macroeconomic information, this occurs at the aggregate level of mass opinion, where such sources of error as inattentiveness or policy ignorance cancel out at the mean.

This second expectation bears on policy attitudes during the Great Recession. A series of new laws and government policies were passed between October 2008 and March 2010. These included the 2008 Emergency Economic Stabilization Act (the \$700 billion financial sector bailout), the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the \$787 billion stimulus package), and the 2010 Affordable Care Act (national health care reform). Because these policy changes expanded government responsibility and increased federal spending, they are possible candidates for shifting mass opinion away from policy support (see Panagopoulos and Shapiro 2011). This is precisely the expectation of MPT (Erikson et al. 2002b:50–51), as well as the scholarship of Soroka and Wlezien (2012). If applicable to the recession era, it would provide an analytical means of accounting for a seemingly limited bearing of economic factors on policy-opinion formation.

Heuristics, Biases, and Motivated Reasoning

To summarize, MPT and established scholarship predict that negative economic shocks and recession stimulate public demands for government policy and activism. An important, alternative strain of political economy scholarship argues that economic downturns lower public demands for government, while still emphasizing the larger, causal importance of macroeconomic change. In theorizing causal interactions between opinion formation and policymaking, the MPT approach identifies a limiting condition on opinion responsiveness to the economy: a sufficiently high rate of change in government policy outputs can serve to dampen or displace macroeconomic change as a source of influence.

But what if both economic and policy inputs into opinion formation are insufficient to account for the key trends we unearthed in the General Social Survey data? Here the

“heuristics and biases” tradition established by Kahneman and his collaborators (Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman 2002; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991; Tversky and Kahneman 1971; see also Kahneman 2011) provides a means of taking seriously noneconomic, even nonrational, sources of influence over attitude formation and choice. Within this tradition, the scenario of motivated reasoning provides a bridge to the questions at hand. In motivated reasoning, individuals reaffirm or even strengthen prior beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Kunda 1990). A rich vein of laboratory work has found that individuals’ prior beliefs about self-esteem or health operate in just this way. When exposed to unwelcome news, for example, individuals take longer to deliberate, experience greater stress, and at times *strengthen* initial beliefs (even when those beliefs are inconsistent with the information that has been processed). This violates classical assumptions of rationality in the processing of information.

Motivated reasoning studies document how individuals may react in unexpected and even perverse ways to environmental conditions and historical change. Applied to the study of policy-attitude formation, evidence shows that individuals’ prior expectations can shape how they reason about topics such as gun control, the Iraq War, and counterterrorism (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012; Gaines et al. 2007; Taber and Lodge 2006). By the same token, however, the diversity of potentially relevant beliefs means that motivated reasoning scholarship is simply an analytic starting point in research applications. To put more meat on the bones, we need to explore *specific* mechanisms activated in concrete settings.

We consider three candidates in this study. The first is a classic in cross-national scholarship: *stratification beliefs* (Bobo 1991; Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener 1995; Kreidl 2000), where the degree of support for individualism and the legitimacy of markets have been at the center of theory and research on U.S.

exceptionalism (e.g., Della Fave 1980; Lipset 1996; Shafer 1999; Wildavsky 1991). Applied in the context of the recession, if individuals think they can or should get ahead on their own, they may respond to negative macroeconomic conditions by intensifying their beliefs in an unregulated economy, resisting attempts to expand the scope of government responsibility and provision. This would give stratification beliefs a central role in explaining the phenomenon of declining government support.

A second candidate is *partisanship*. The importance of partisan identities to citizens’ attitudes and behavior is a long-standing focus of research and scholarly debate (e.g., Aldrich 2011; Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Partisanship has elicited new analytic interest and controversy in light of accumulating evidence of elite-level polarization in Congress (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; see also Jacobson 2010). With redistricting, rule changes in Congress, and especially the transformation of the Democratic South after the civil rights era, the two parties are now less constrained to centrist positions. Parties’ positions have become considerably more distinct, and scholars continue to debate the degree to which elite conflicts have filtered down to voter-level reasoning about domestic issues (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; cf. Fiorina and Abrams 2011) and foreign policy conflicts (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2007; Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon 2009). Insofar as voters now operate in an environment rich with partisan signals, these may have overridden the impact of economic change during the Great Recession. If so, partisanship among voters may account for recent patterns of public responsiveness.

The final mechanism we consider is central to the robust and interdisciplinary literature on racial attitudes in the United States (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000). Cast resonantly by Sears, Kinder, and their colleagues as “symbolic racism” (Sears et al. 1997) or “racial resentment” (Kinder and

Sanders 1996), racialized distinctions and stereotypes are a preconscious source of reasoning in laboratory studies and in survey research on welfare and government attitudes (Gilens 1999; McConnell and Leibold 2001; Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji 2007). Were the potent micro-politics of race mobilized with the election of America's first black president (cf. Heerwig and McCabe 2009)? If so, symbolic racism may shed light on the public's seemingly contradictory response to the Great Recession.

DATA AND MEASURES

Our analyses investigate the factors behind patterns of opinion formation during the recession era. Our focus is on economic factors suggested by MPT and related economy-centered scholarship, alongside alternative cognitive and social-psychological factors. The second issue we address extends our investigation of political economy approaches by analyzing the government overreach scenario. We investigate the possibility that negative public responses to new policies generated an aversion to government spending or regulation.

We analyze the repeated General Social Surveys and the recently released GSS 2006–2008–2010 panel (Smith et al. 2011). These data enable measurement of policy preferences and our main candidates of interest, alongside other established factors. The GSS survey and panel data cover the key 2006 through 2010 period spanning the emergence and maturation of the recession.⁷

Throughout the analysis of GSS data, our dependent variable is the scale of five government responsibility items introduced in the article's first section. Question-wording and response format are identical across surveys (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Items scale with a high degree of reliability ($\alpha = .74$), and scale scores are estimated with a factor-analytic model.

Our multivariate analyses start by analyzing the government responsibility scale using the repeated surveys. We use linear regression models to estimate main effects for all independent variables, paying additional attention

to interactions between key covariates and survey year. Using coefficient estimates and covariate means, we decompose trends for the 2008 to 2010 recession era. These decomposition estimates tell us which factors matter most in explaining the dramatic, recent downturn in government responsibility support.

We next turn to analysis of GSS panel data to buttress the first set of results. A perennial methodological issue in observational social science is the possibility of omitted variables, and any study of policy attitudes benefits from taking up this challenge. We use a fixed-effects approach to address omitted variable scenarios, thereby eliminating the impact of any unmeasured factors having time-invariant effects (e.g., Halaby 2004; see also Baltagi 2008; Hsiao 1986). This is a deliberately and methodologically conservative strategy. As we will discuss, it lends further confidence to key estimates.

Table 1 lists independent variables in the GSS analysis.⁸ Our first is for evaluations of respondents' economic situation. The next three variables represent our cognitive/non-economic candidates. Stratification beliefs are measured by an item asking respondents their degree of agreement with the proposition that "people get ahead by their own hard work." Partisanship is measured using the classic seven-point scale whose poles are strongly-identified Democrat and strongly-identified Republican. Symbolic racism is captured with an item central to research on the subject (see Sears et al. 1997).

The next four items in Table 1 are controls for unemployment status, union membership, class identification, and household income. The remaining variables represent other established sources of influence on policy-attitude formation. Male and white capture gender and race-related factors behind policy attitudes, and three dummy variables capture regional differences in attitudes. Education, religious participation, marital status, and labor force participation are additional controls.

In the multivariate analyses, symbolic racism and stratification beliefs cannot be analyzed together, because the two items were not fielded in the same GSS ballots. We thus

Table 1. Independent Variables from the General Social Surveys

Variable	Item Wording/Coding
Economic evaluations	During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same? (worse = 1, same = 2, better = 3)
Stratification beliefs	Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important? (hard work = 1, luck = 0)
Partisanship	1 = strong Democrat; 2 = weak Democrat; 3 = independent Democrat; 4 = independent; 5 = independent Republican; 6 = weak Republican; 7 = strong Republican
Symbolic racism	Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors. (strongly disagree = 1; slightly disagree = 2; neither = 3; slightly agree = 4; strongly agree = 5)
Unemployment status	0,1
Union membership	0,1
Class identification	upper/middle = 1; 0 = else
Household income	2010 \$s
Male	0,1
White	0,1
South	0 = Northeast
West	0 = Northeast
Midwest	0 = Northeast
Age	Years
Education	Years
Religious participation	1 = never; 2 = less than once a year; 3 = about once or twice a year; 4 = several times a year; 5 = about once a month; 6 = 2 to 3 times a month; 7 = nearly every week; 8 = every week; 9 = several times a week
Labor force participation	0,1 = full-time or part-time

conduct this part of the analyses using two separate estimation samples. All results we report use recommended weights for the number of adults in a household, subsampling of nonrespondents, and differential non-response across areas stemming from introduction of the GSS panel starting with the 2006 survey (see Smith et al. 2011). Inclusion versus exclusion of weights has small effects on coefficient estimates and somewhat larger consequences for descriptive statistics (including analysis of over-time change in covariate levels). Regardless, use of weights is particularly appropriate in light of the GSS's recent redesign to incorporate a longitudinal data component.

Our analysis of the government overreach scenario draws from two additional data sources: Gallup surveys (Gallup 2011) and Evaluations of Government and Society

Study (EGSS) surveys (American National Election Studies 2012). The yearly Gallup surveys we analyze span 2001 through 2011. Our independent variable is partisanship (coded as a simplified, binary variable for Republican versus Democratic identifiers); our dependent variable is an item asking, "In general, do you think there is too little, too much, or about the right amount of government regulation of business and industry?" The three EGSS surveys we analyze were fielded in 2011 and 2012, and the independent variable is partisanship (coded using the more detailed CPS/NES seven-point scale). EGSS are not repeated surveys, so policy-attitude items are specific to a given survey. We analyze five policy items from the May–June 2011 survey, eight from the December 2011 survey, and four from the February 2012 survey (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

Table 2. Models of Government Responsibility Attitudes

Models	R^2	df	Prob > F^a
1. main effects	.241	31	—
2. m1 + economic evaluations × Dem vs. GOP president	.241	32	.27
3. m1 + economic evaluations × year(continuous)	.242	32	.01
4. m1 + economic evaluations × year(indicator)	.242	46	.31
5. m3 + stratification beliefs × year(continuous)	.242	33	.38
6. m3 + stratification beliefs × year(indicator)	.243	47	.26
7. m3 + partisanship × economic evaluations	.242	33	.49
8. m3 + partisanship × year(continuous)	.243	33	.00
9. m3 + GOP partisanship × year(continuous)	.244	33	.00
10. m9 + Dem. partisanship × year(continuous)	.244	34	.46
11. m9 + GOP partisanship × year(indicator)	.248	47	.00
12. m9 + partisanship × year(indicator)	.249	48	.00
13. m12 + GOP partisanship × year(indicator)	.251	62	.20
14. m12 + race × year(continuous)	.250	49	.00

Note: $N = 9,678$.

^aWald test for interactions = 0.

RESULTS

What Explains Declining Support for Government Responsibility?

We start with the repeated GSS, using the government responsibility scale as our dependent variable. Our estimation sample is from the 1984 through 2010 surveys and includes all independent variables except symbolic racism (analyzed using a second estimation sample). In Table 2, we consider evidence for interactions between survey year and key covariates.

There is evidence that the effect of economic evaluations on government responsibility attitudes changed over time in a linear fashion (Model 3), rather than being conditional on partisan control of the presidency (Model 2) or according to a strictly nonlinear pattern change (Model 4). The impact of stratification beliefs, in contrast, did not change over time (Models 5 and 6); this holds if we use Model 1 as a baseline for comparisons.⁹ For their part, effects of partisanship on government responsibility attitudes do not depend on respondents' economic evaluations (Model 7).

Partisanship interacts with time (Model 8), and an interaction model restricting partisanship trends to only Republican identifiers

yields a slightly better fit to the data (Model 9).¹⁰ In turn, Model 10 suggests that when a linear trend affecting Republican identifiers is taken into account, there is no evidence for a linear trend pertaining specifically to Democratic identifiers. Allowing Republican partisanship to interact freely with year in Model 11 improves model fit, as does a parallel trend model (Model 12) that uses the original, inclusive measure of partisanship (for both Republican and Democratic identifiers). Model 13 provides further clarifying evidence that these unconstrained interactions with time affect Republican and Democratic identifiers in equal fashion.¹¹ Model 14 offers evidence that government responsibility attitudes among whites (versus non-whites) changed between 1984 and 2010.

We use estimates for our preferred model (see Table S1 in the Appendix for coefficient estimates and standard errors) and sample means for covariates to decompose the sources of change in government responsibility attitudes. This decomposition is for predicted change in attitudes between 2008 and 2010, the years in our estimation samples that straddle the coming and maturation of the Great Recession. Estimates in the first column of Table 3 are predicted change in government

Table 3. Decomposition of Aggregate Change in Policy Attitudes

Independent Variable	Estimate	Percent of Total
Economic evaluations	.008	-7.5
Stratification beliefs	-.003	2.8
Partisanship	-.232	218.9
Unemployment status	.002	-1.9
Union membership	-.003	2.8
Class identification	.001	-.9
Household income	.010	-9.4
Male	-.006	5.7
White	.006	-5.7
Region of residence	-.008	7.5
Age	-.004	3.8
Education	-.001	.9
Religious participation	.001	-9.9
Labor force participation	.000	0
Residual opinion change	.123	-116.0
Total predicted change: 2008 to 2010	-.106	100.1

responsibility attitudes attributable to a row-specific factor; estimates in the second column are the percentage of total change explained by a factor. For example, the .01 estimate for household income indicates that change in this factor is predicted to raise support for government responsibility attitudes. The negative sign of the accompanying estimate (-9.4 percent) in the table's second column reminds us that this factor (incorrectly) anticipates *growing* support for government responsibility between 2008 and 2010.

So why did the U.S. public turn to comparatively lower preferences for government action during the recession? Table 3's results point overwhelmingly to partisanship. Indeed, the -.232 estimate for partisanship exceeds the total predicted shift in aggregate opinion. This suggests that had only changes in the preferences of partisan identifiers occurred, there would have been a larger drop in overall government policy preferences. The public would have moved even faster away from government support during the critical 2008 to 2010 period.

Next we turn to results for economic evaluations. Recall that this factor is central to both MPT and dissenting literatures on opinion responsiveness to economic change. At .008, our estimates suggest that aggregate

change in economic evaluations exerted pressure for a slight increase in preferences for government. This result is in line with MPT scholarship, yet the magnitude of this effect is quite small.

Table 3's results for compositional changes relating to gender, region, and union membership bear on trends in support for government responsibility. But the magnitude of these effects is modest (like those for stratification beliefs). Each of the latter factors helps to account for no more than 8 percent of the overall shift in attitudes. This leaves partisanship as the major explanatory candidate. The positively signed residual change component (.123) again underscores how partisanship's impact exceeds the total predicted shift in aggregate opinion.

What about our third candidate, racial attitudes? Here we turn to results from our second estimation sample using the 1994 through 2010 surveys. From the start there are limits due to evidence of a slight, *declining* trend in symbolic racism, including from 2008 through 2010, where measured racism dropped slightly from 4.002 to 3.897.¹² When we estimate the impact of symbolic racism on government responsibility, we see evidence of its relevance ($\beta = -.156$, s.e. = .01). But

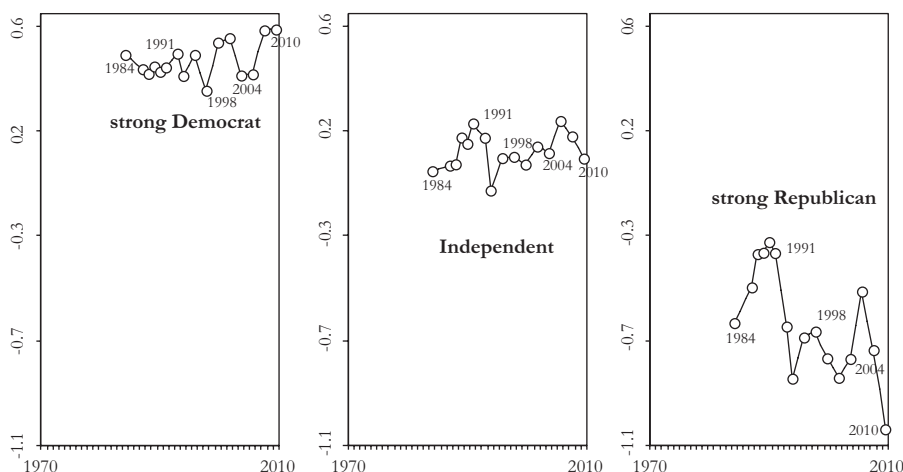


Figure 2. Predicted Government Responsibility Attitudes by Partisan Group

Note: Charts' y-axes defined by the full range of predicted values (higher scores indicate greater preference for government responsibility).

when we put these estimates together, we obtain an expected *increase* (.016) in aggregate support for government responsibility between 2008 and 2010. Although clearly relevant to policy-attitude formation in the cross-section, symbolic racism appears incapable of explaining the phenomenon at hand. This suggests that trends in racialized reactions among voters—first to Barack Obama's candidacy and then his presidency—are unlikely by themselves to have constrained public willingness to consider new federal programs and a larger role for government.

We can interpret the impact of partisanship in greater detail using calculations summarized in Figure 2. These charts show predicted scores for the government responsibility scale across three ideal-typical partisan groups: strongly identified Democrats, strongly identified Republicans, and Independent identifiers. Looking over time reveals an important finding about the influence of partisanship. Partisan groups responded quite differently in their policy preference formation at specific points in time, and partisan divergence was most extensive from 2006 to 2010. During this time, strong Democrats moved toward greater support for government responsibility (primarily between 2006 and 2008), and Independents trended toward lower levels of support. Strong Republicans, for their part,

moved even more quickly in the direction of preferring less government responsibility during the recession.

We examine trends in the overall magnitude of partisan differences by taking the standard deviation of predicted scores for all seven groups measured by the partisanship scale. These results (see Figure 3) reveal that partisan differences declined in magnitude during the 1980s, turned around during the 1990s, and dropped again in early years of the new millennium. But 2008 saw a very large increase, and by 2010 partisan differences in government responsibility attitudes reached an all-time high. Figure 3's estimates identify 1994 and 2002 as earlier periods of partisan divergence, yet the recession era elicited particularly divergent policy attitudes among partisan groups.

These results are powerful, illuminating *which* segments of the public contributed to recent and unexpected patterns of opinion responsiveness, and *how* partisanship is key to the explanation. Before drawing out further inferences, we must address a methodological challenge in estimating the effects of partisanship on government-attitude formation. What about omitted variables? Conventional survey (and observational) research increasingly confronts the scenario of self-selection and unmeasured factors. We seek to put our results on a suitably firm footing.

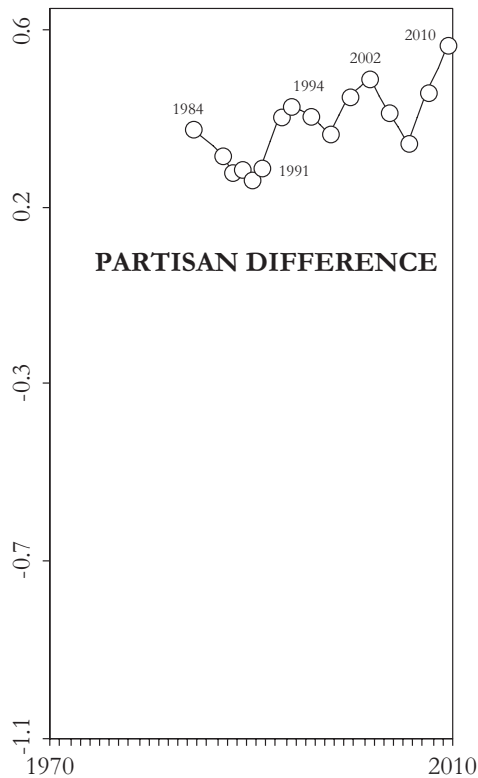


Figure 3. Partisan Cleavage in Government Responsibility Attitudes

To get purchase, we move to the 2006–2008–2010 GSS panel. For this analysis, we have the same independent and dependent variables as before, but now they are assembled in longitudinal fashion with observations for individuals at three points in time. We reanalyze our model of government responsibility attitudes, using a fixed-effects approach to remove all time-invariant effects of unmeasured variables.

When fixed effects takes out between-individual variance from the estimation, the coefficient estimate for partisanship remains substantial and significant (see Table 4). This is further evidence that the strong link between partisanship and level of preferences for government cannot be argued away on the basis of omitted variable scenarios. We are on firmer ground when it comes to thinking

Table 4. Fixed-Effects

	Coef.	s.e.	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i> > <i>t</i>
Partisanship	-.067	.02	-2.71	.01
Economic evaluations	-.043	.04	1.00	.32

Note: Number of observations/groups = 960/320.

about partisanship as a causal influence over policy reasoning.¹³

Also informative is the nonsignificant coefficient for the impact of changing economic evaluations. The fixed-effects estimate tells us there is no evidence that voters' economic evaluations were associated with their reasoning about government responsibility during key years covering the emergence of the Great Recession. This result provides little support for established or dissenting perspectives on opinion responsiveness to economic change during the recession era.

The Government Overreach Scenario

There is one final possibility to consider. It stems from MPT's expectation of opinion responsiveness to *policy* change. Could such recession-era legislative changes as the 2009 stimulus bill or health care reform in 2010 have been the trigger behind declining support for federal programs (on grounds that the public perceived the initiatives as an overreach by government)? If this explanation holds, the public as a whole was propelled away from government support during the recession era. We should thus see less evidence of a partisan divide in policy-opinion formation once new (and extensive) government programs were implemented after early October of 2008. This should be particularly true for issues concerning public attitudes toward the federal government's size, regulatory reach, or overall spending.

But that is not what we find analyzing yearly Gallup data for changing attitudes toward regulation from 2001 through 2011. The left-hand panel in Figure 4 shows an initial dramatic rise in public perceptions of "too

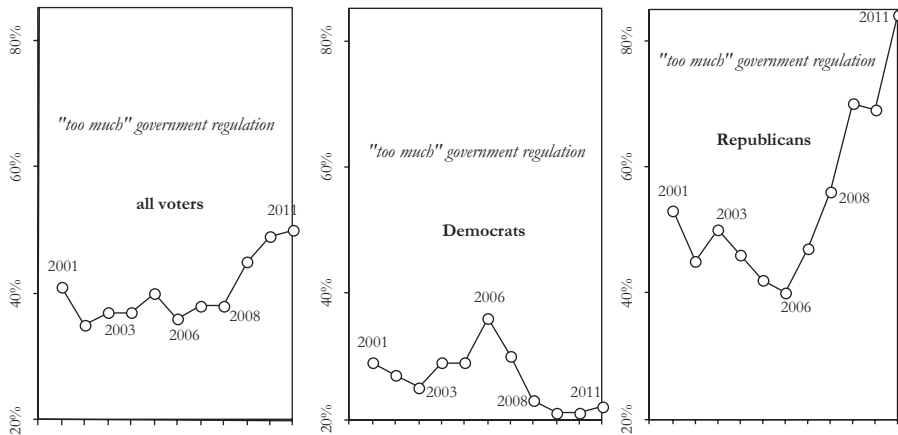


Figure 4. Government Overreach?

Note: Charts' y-axes defined by the range of observed values.

Source: Gallup data (Gallup 2011).

much" government regulation after 2008. This is exactly what we would expect according to MPT and the government overreach scenario. But on closer inspection, the next two panels—for Democratic versus Republican identifiers—reveal a very different set of opinion trends. Republican identifiers' regulatory attitudes trended away from support, in close keeping with the government overreach scenario. Democratic identifiers' favorable attitudes toward regulation, in contrast, were virtually unchanged during the recession era.

These results provide new evidence that Republican identifiers were most likely to perceive recession-era policy as regulatory overreach. This is a striking extension of the partisanship-based divergence in policy attitudes that we discovered with the GSS data. As before, these results are anomalous for MPT assumptions that the public tends to react homogeneously to policy change, with the rate of change in the aggregate capturing all relevant information concerning opinion responsiveness to environmental change.

The 2011–2012 Evaluations of Government and Society Study surveys allow us to look further at a relatively broad range of issues, several of which relate to new laws and policies implemented between 2008 and 2010. We take advantage of the EGSS's continuous items in presenting standardized regression coefficients for gauging the association

between partisanship and the 17 available policy items (see Table A2 in the Appendix). Negative signs for all estimates indicate that higher levels of Republican identification are associated with lower support for government (or liberal policies). Estimates for associations involving government action to reduce income differences (–.359), the 2010 health care reform (–.354), government's general role (–.386), and preferential hiring of blacks (–.400) suggest particularly strong partisan cleavages. Such domains as gays and lesbians in the armed forces (–.156) and Social Security privatization (–.207) suggest lower levels of partisan divergence. All but one of the 17 coefficients is significant at the .05 level.

The EGSS's survey/year-specific estimates deliver a second finding. The magnitude of association between partisanship and preferences concerning new laws and policies implemented during the recession era is often *larger* in comparison to estimates for other measures of government activity. This is not the pattern anticipated by the government overreach scenario. Far from generating greater resistance among the public as a whole, recession-era policies (and the idea of government provision or activism) appear to have elicited resistance mainly among Republicans in recent years (and to a lesser extent, Independents). These results extend our thematic finding concerning the importance of

partisanship to public opinion responsiveness during the recession.

DISCUSSION

How did Americans respond to the Great Recession? On the eve of the recession, a common expectation among many social scientists and political commentators was that an economic calamity of this magnitude would stimulate greater support for public provision and government regulation of the economy. Our analyses of GSS data do not bear this out: between 2008 and 2010, Americans tended to move away from support for government responsibility for addressing social problems.

Initially, at least, this new trend in policy opinion is more in line with an important, dissenting strain of scholarship arguing that periods of economic expansion facilitate (and downturns constrain) public preference for government. But when we turn to the decomposition analysis, this scholarship provides limited purchase. Not only does aggregate change in economic factors anticipate *growing* preferences for government responsibility, the explanatory impact of the latter is quite modest in magnitude. Further consideration of economic factors during the recession era is in order. Note, though, that our longitudinal analysis of the GSS panel provides no evidence that *individual-level* change in economic evaluations was associated with change in attitudes toward government.

Macro Polity Theory is key to understanding the theoretical stakes at hand. MPT places established expectations concerning public opinion responsiveness to economic change on a systematic foundation, using insights concerning aggregation and the applicability of rational expectations. That voters responded during a period of market failure by preferring less government responsibility is important. This raises questions concerning the broader argument that the U.S. political economy is organized so as to generate predictable or even optimal responses to changes in the business cycle.

What specific mechanisms account for apparent departures from economic rationality in the current era? Turning to the candi-

dates we extracted from cognitive and social psychology, explanations rooted in symbolic racism theory appear insufficient, because they anticipate pressures for individuals to have moved, over time, to more positive views of government responsibility. Classic scholarship on stratification beliefs points us in the right direction, but this factor accounts for a modest portion of the 2008 to 2010 trend in policy opinion.

We find that the key is partisanship, and our fixed-effects analysis provides buttressing evidence against omitted variable scenarios. Levels change in party identification, combined with a growing pattern of association over time, appear to have exerted considerable pressures toward declining support for government responsibility among the public as a whole (cf. Manza, Heerwig, and McCabe 2012). Looking in detail at predictions from our statistical model, we find evidence of group-specific trends. Rather than moving in parallel to one another, government attitude trends among partisan groups show considerable divergence, even polarization, over time. Most notably, we find the greatest degree of group divergence from 2008 to 2010. Strong Democratic identifiers, for instance, moved toward slightly higher levels of support for government responsibility, and strong Republican identifiers moved much faster in the opposite direction.

These results bear directly on a second explanatory thesis within MPT scholarship, namely, that public responsiveness to new (and extensive) government policy innovations tend to propel mass preferences back toward markets and private solutions. Our evidence for partisan reasoning and aggregate effects span not only the GSS items, but additional, policy-specific measures of relevance to the contours of recent government action. These data from Gallup and EGSS surveys provide no support for the government overreach scenario. Robust evidence of a partisan divide (and group-specific trends) departs from the explanatory logic of MPT scholarship.

These results pose new questions for theorizing based solely on aggregate-level policy attitudes. Recall that a key assumption underlying expectations of opinion responsiveness to

environmental change is that aggregation is essential in addressing such problems as non-attitudes among individuals and measurement error in surveys. In the additional scenario of “parallel publics” (Page and Shapiro 1992: chapter 7), population subgroups respond similarly to environmental stimuli, rendering identical group versus population-wide rates of opinion change. These considerations are compelling, but there may be instances in which aggregation masks group-specific trends in attitude formation (Enns et al. 2012), and not all opinion change is thus homogenous across the population.

This is the phenomena during the recession we have brought to light: population layers defined by their partisan biases responded heterogeneously when exposed to the same conditions, adopting divergent attitude patterns. In this case, aggregating policy attitudes may mislead. Attitudes of the U.S. public as a whole moved toward lower levels of government support, but not because all citizens experienced the same trends and reasoned in the same way. Instead, individuals who more strongly identified with the Republican Party moved away from government faster than Democratic Party identifiers moved toward government. For the recession era, we saw this over-time pattern in both the GSS and Gallup Surveys. This suggests the relevance of considering how noneconomic processes can, in some contexts, moderate how individuals and groups receive information and historical events.¹⁴

Further Considerations and Next Steps

We conclude by considering two issues that merit additional attention. A first concerns mass partisanship: a central theme within recent scholarship has been the importance of party identification as a social identity or heuristic, one that can operate within specific contexts as a powerful conduit linking politicians’ messages or issue positions to voters’ own reasoning on issues (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Green et al. 2002; see also Bartels 2002). How does our study fit within the larger research tradition?

Data summarized in Figure 5 show the novel bearing of macro-level trends in the partisan political context with respect to our own findings. The first chart summarizes a key element of Poole and colleagues’ now-classic estimates of Congressional roll call votes (see Poole 2012). Here we can see that although voting scores for House members diverged from 1970 through 2010, Republicans moved much faster toward conservative policy positions than Democrats did toward liberal positions. The right-hand chart reprises our findings about preferences for government responsibility, although now among all Democratic and Republican identifiers to enable the new comparison.¹⁵

When we look at the overall historical period covered by these data, it is reasonable to see party-level polarization operating as the key background factor shaping voter-level reasoning about government. Partisan identifiers likely took cues from political elites, with increasingly divergent positions endorsed by Democratic versus Republican politicians channeling how identifiers reasoned about government’s role and responsibility. In this way, our results contribute to ongoing debates over the degree to which Congressional and party-level trends apply to ordinary voters or mainly to political elites (Abramowitz 2013; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011; McCarty et al. 2006). Whether voter-level developments involve genuine polarization, in which partisans change their minds, or instead partisan sorting, in which ideologically minded individuals transition to a more suitable party (Levendusky 2009), is as yet unclear and calls for further research.

But Figure 5’s results also suggest a degree of divergence between mass and elite-level series during the 2008 to 2010 recession. On the Republican side, partisan identifiers moved more sharply to the right in attitudinal resistance to government in comparison to Republican House members’ roll call voting trends. For their part, Democratic identifiers appear to track more closely trends characterizing House Democrats between 2008 and 2010. What might this mean? Sources other than parties may have influenced Republican

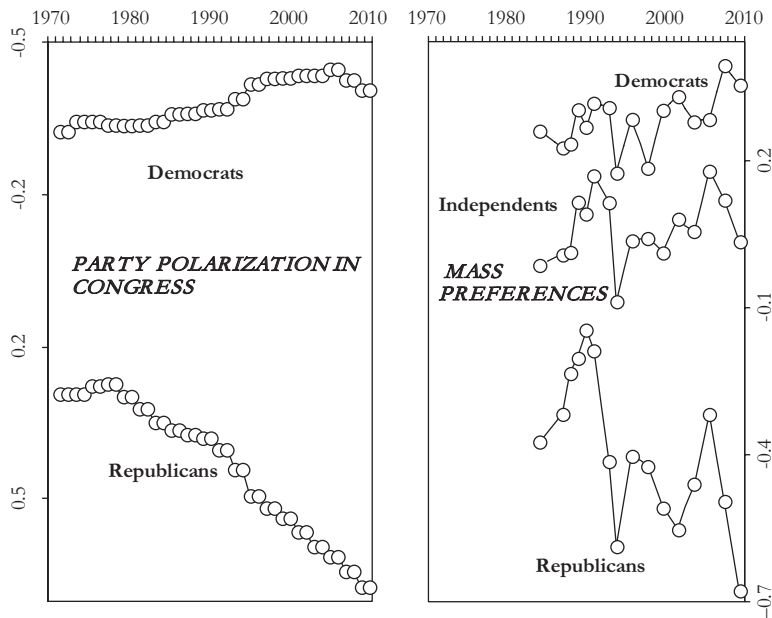


Figure 5. Party and Voter-Level Polarization

Note: Charts' y-axes defined by the full range of predicted values. Lower polarization scores indicate greater liberalism in roll call voting; higher preference scores indicate greater government preference among voters.

voters' policy reasoning during this key period. Media discussion networks and social movement mobilization, for instance, may have shaped voters' policy-preference formation, and these possibilities deserve scrutiny.

A second issue brings us back to MPT scholarship and links between policymaking and mass preferences. Under conditions involving group-specific patterns and trends in opinion formation, how do policy officials respond to mass preferences? An initial scenario is that politicians continue to aggregate (Erikson et al. 2002a; Stimson 2011), incorporating attitude trends on the margin into legislative behavior. If so, the pattern of partisan divergence we unearthed would anticipate a corresponding drop in the quality and degree of representation.¹⁶ Going beyond MPT and median voter expectations of aggregation, a quite different scenario is that partisan divergence in policy opinions leads to politicians giving greater weight to the preferences of a specific segment of the population. In this context, partisanship or ideological "extremism"

(Bafumi and Herron 2010), alongside income level (Gilens 2012), are candidates for future scholarship to investigate.

The preceding scenarios are important ones for U.S. politics scholarship in general, and for interdisciplinary work on policy responsiveness to mass opinion. Up through the new millennium there was evidence of expected patterns of public responsiveness, and our estimates find the partisan cleavages in attitudes to have been generally smaller during this time. The exceptionally large partisan-based divergence in government responsibility preferences from 2008 through 2010 may turn out to be relatively unusual. Still, this was a period of considerable historical significance. How were such key pieces of legislation as the Affordable Care Act informed by aggregate and group-specific trends in the public's preferences concerning government? Did overall movement away from government support deter politicians from pursuing more extensive reform? As the Great Recession era winds down, these questions are important ones for scholars.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Policy-Attitude Items from the General Social Surveys

Item	Wording/Coding
Standard of living of poor	Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans. . . . Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself . . . (1 = people should take care of themselves; 5 = government should improve living standards)
Blacks' living standards	Some people think that (Blacks/Negroes/African-Americans) have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to (Blacks/Negroes/African-Americans). (1 = government should not give special treatment; 5 = government is obligated to help blacks)
Paying for doctors and hospital	In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves. (1 = people should take care of themselves; 5 = responsibility of the government to help)
Solve our country's problems	Some people think that the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses. Others disagree and think that the government should do even more to solve our country's problems. Still others have opinions somewhere in between. (1 = government is doing too much; 5 = government should do more)
Reduce income differences	Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. (1 = government should not concern itself with reducing income differences; 7 = government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor)

Table A2. Interrelationship of Partisanship and Policy Attitudes, 2011 to 2012

Policy Item	Coeff.	N
EGSS 2		
favor...the health care reform law passed in 2010...?	-.472*	371
all estates should be taxed?	-.347*	369
government...make...income difference smaller?	-.359*	371
gays and lesbians...serve...in the armed forces?	-.156*	372
government...see to...job and a good standard of living...?	-.278*	120
EGSS 3		
repeal the health care reform law...?	-.354*	1,246
reduce...government spending on everything...?	-.251*	1,249
end...Medicare system and replace it with...credits...?	-.206*	1,251
raise the minimum wage every year...?	-.321*	1,250
increase taxes on people making over \$250,000...?	-.358*	1,250
increase taxes on corporations...?	-.308*	1,249
replace Social Security with private...accounts...?	-.207*	1,250
“Balanced Budget Amendment” to the U.S. Constitution...?	-.234*	1,249
EGSS 4		
government regulation of business is good for society?	-.300*	1,232
government generally be doing more...things...?	-.386*	1,229
number of people...allowed to legally move...be increased...?	-.045	1,236
blacks should be given preference in hiring...?	-.400*	1,202

Note: Data are from the Evaluations of Government and Society Study: EGSS 2 (May 11 to June 1, 2011); EGSS 3 (December 7 to 13, 2011); and EGSS 4 (February 18 to 23, 2012). Fully standardized coefficients estimated with controls for economic evaluations and EGSS post-stratification weights.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed test).

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Notes

1. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002b:48) find that “increasing unemployment causes a surge of support for government programs”; a single percent

rise in unemployment is predicted to generate a net demand for approximately four new liberal laws.

2. Kenworthy and Owens (2011) analyze repeated General Social Survey data on a variety of government and business attitudes, reporting no evidence that the 2008 recession elicited a more favorable pattern of attitudes. Bartels’s (2012) analysis of 2008, 2010, and 2011 YouGov national surveys finds little change in attitudes toward taxes during a period that witnessed the coming of the recession and the Occupy Wall Street movement.
3. Extending Figure 1’s results, GSS items for spending priorities (see Figure S1 in the online supplement [<http://asr.sagepub.com/supplemental>]) provide further evidence of significant change away from liberal positions in 11 of 20 cases ($p < .05$). Considering the entire archive of 25 GSS domestic policy preference items covering the 2006 to 2010 period, we find a significant decrease in preference for government in 16 cases. No case shows a significant increase in preference for government or domestic spending priorities.

4. While MPT and related scholarship argue that economic recessions enhance public support for government intervention, an alternative body of work advances the opposite hypothesis, that downturns erode public support for government activism (Durr 1993; Soroka and Wlezien 2012; Stevenson 2001). This hypothesis is consistent with the General Social Survey results presented in Figure 1, and it commands consideration in our analyses.
5. Economic voting scholarship has generated a body of criticism and dissent (e.g., Anderson 2007; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998). Expectations about substantial effects of economic conditions on elections nonetheless remain widely embraced in the U.S. context, and analysts continue to unpack presidential elections of the 1990s and the new millennium with respect to the state of the economy (e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2010; Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Campbell 2005, 2008).
6. The reality of low levels of factual information, alongside limited interest and attention on the part of many voters, has formed the analytic backdrop to scholarship on U.S. public opinion and political behavior since the original *American Voter* study (Campbell et al. 1960; see also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992).
7. GSS data have been a core ingredient in MPT estimates of domestic policy attitudes, what analysts term policy “mood” (Erikson et al. 2002a; Stimson 2004).
8. The final independent variable is for survey year; as we will discuss, this enters the analyses as a main effect for time period and as a source of interaction with other select covariates.
9. Estimating a model in which the interaction with year is constrained to 2010 (versus other years) for both stratification beliefs and economic evaluations shows no improvement in fit. The same is true with respect to constraining the racism \times year effect in the second estimation sample.
10. Model 9’s measure of GOP partisanship allows Republican identification to vary continuously (for strong partisans, weak partisans, and partisan leaners) when interacting with time. We find evidence that this measure is preferable to alternative trend parameterizations that impose restrictions on the structure or degree of Republican identification.
11. This can be observed with respect to Model 13’s results, where testing for the significance of Republican identifier-specific interactions with year yields a p -value of .20. In contrast, the parallel Wald test for the (inclusive) partisanship interactions in Model 13 is $p = .00$. For interested readers, the online supplement includes data and syntax files.
12. These estimates use weights although the declining trend is apparent in the unweighted data as well. Parallel trends involving a modest reduction in more blatant racial stereotypes can also be observed

using two GSS items for respondents’ willingness to evaluate blacks as “lazy” or “unintelligent.”

13. What of the reverse interpretation, that is, government attitudes shape partisanship? In this context, studies by Gerber, Huber, and Washington (2010) and Enns, Kellstedt, and McAvoy (2012) are informative. In a field experiment conducted in 2008, Gerber and colleagues found that Connecticut voters who changed their identification were considerably more likely to also change their evaluation of candidates and attitudes on a number of policy issues. Analyzing a variety of over-time public opinion surveys, Enns and colleagues present an array of time-series evidence suggesting that partisanship has shaped voters’ attitudes toward the economy and their degree of consumer confidence.
14. In arguing for the relevance of heuristics and biases microfoundations, we should note other social-psychological approaches focusing on such forces as moralized evaluations or social network processes (e.g., Flache and Macy 2011; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010; Vaisey 2009). How these approaches would interpret the importance of partisanship in the current study is an intriguing question, as is the larger challenge of engaging points of overlap versus divergence with the heuristics and biases tradition.
15. To facilitate comparison, we graph the two sets of estimates across their respective, full ranges. Note that estimates are predicted scores, so nonlinear trends are real and cannot be further smoothed away.
16. Past research focusing on Congressional (and sub-national) districts provides evidence that median voter representation is lower under conditions in which constituents’ preferences are heterogeneous (Gerber and Lewis 2004).

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