

Clarity of Responsibility and Vote Choice

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INTRODUCTION

Among the major theories about how institutions influence voting behavior, the theory of clarity of responsibility is a relative newcomer. It was developed by G. Bingham Powell and Guy D. Whitten in a 1993 paper published in the *American Journal of Political Science* as a possible solution to a puzzle in the economic voting literature. Although there are substantial disagreements about how the basic concepts in this theory should be measured, it has received robust support across empirical tests and has been extended in a variety of interesting ways. In this chapter, we begin with a discussion of the origins of this theory. We then discuss the influence that this theory has had on studies of economic voting and the range of ways in which it has been studied, challenged, and extended.

DEVELOPING THE THEORY OF CLARITY OF RESPONSIBILITY

The vast literature on economic voting (see Duch and Stevenson 2008, Hibbs 2006, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013, and this *Handbook*, Volume 2 [Chapter 26], for recent reviews of this literature) has overwhelmingly found support for the basic theoretical proposition that voters hold incumbent politicians responsible for the performance of the economy. In this section, we briefly recount the history of this extensive literature as it pertains to the development of the theory of clarity of responsibility. Its development was driven by a combination of theoretical

innovations and the expansion of cases that tested successive theories of economic voting.

The most widely cited early articles on economic voting models are Goodhart and Bhansali (1970), Kramer (1971), and Fair (1978). Each of these articles presented empirical tests of a simple economic voting theory in which objective measures of macroeconomic fluctuations in the period prior to an election were thought to influence aggregate support for the incumbent party. Goodhart and Bhansali's tests were conducted using data from the United Kingdom while Kramer and Fair used data from the United States.

In the early 1980s, substantial efforts were made to refine both the theories and empirical tests of economic voting. Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) explored the individual-level mechanisms of economic voting and introduced the term 'sociotropic' voting to explain the mechanism through which individuals would hold incumbents responsible for macro conditions rather than individuals' own personal or micro-level economic fortunes. In response to this, Kramer (1983) added a new wrinkle to economic voting theory by suggesting that some elements of economic performance are politically relevant while others are not. In doing so, Kramer framed one of the major challenges to students of economic voting – theoretically identifying and empirically measuring the politically relevant aspects of economic performance. Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos (1982) proposed that the ideology of governing parties would play a role in determining which economic indicators would be used by voters to evaluate economic performances. Their idea was that, since parties of different ideological viewpoints advocated for different aspects of the economy, they would hold governments accountable for the aspect of the economy that governing parties emphasized. In particular, Hibbs et al. advanced the proposition that governing parties from the left would be held more accountable for unemployment while parties from the right would be held more accountable for inflation. Together, these new theoretical developments moved theories of economic voting from the simple diagram on the left side of Figure 5.1 to the more complicated diagram depicted on the right side of this figure.

While Kinder and Kiewiet, and Kramer relied on data from the United States to test their theories of economic voting, Hibbs et al. utilized data from the United States, the United Kingdom, and West Germany. In their study of West Germany, they struggled to make sense of results from a time period during which the nation was governed by a grand coalition of the two major political parties (the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, which were ruling together from 1966 to 1969). As the authors discuss, this presented a challenge for their theoretical expectations about the interplay of government ideology and objective economic indicators to determine the impact of the politically relevant economy. While they found some support for their theoretical propositions across all three nations they studied, they also found considerable cross-national variation in the way that the economy influenced support for incumbent politicians.

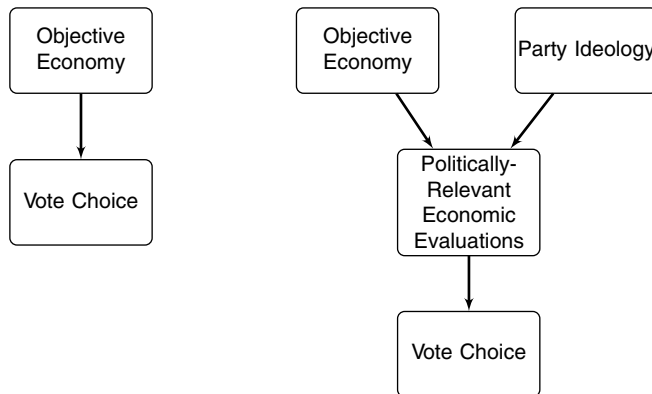


Figure 5.1 Early theories of economic voting

This heterogeneity of economic voting evidence was echoed in Lewis-Beck's (1986) attempt to investigate the individual-level mechanisms of economic voting across nations. Using survey data from Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, Lewis-Beck found evidence that economic evaluations mattered for vote choice in each of the nations studied, but that there was considerable heterogeneity across these countries in terms of the strength of the economic voting relationship. This led Lewis-Beck to raise questions about the economic voting enterprise as a whole:

All of these findings, stimulating as they may be, leave many issues unsettled. A major one, obviously, is whether the strong economic effects are transitory. Are they merely a product of the high salience of economic concerns at the time of the survey? Perhaps, in the context of better economic times, the effects would be much less. This brings up the related question of how permanent a place economic conditions have in models of voting behavior. If economic issues are a 'sometime thing' for voters, then their status as vote determinants is diminished, in comparison to the ever-present, long-term of class, religion, and ideology. (Lewis-Beck 1986, p. 343)

The first pooled time series tests of economic voting theory by Strøm and Lipset (1984), Lewis-Beck and Mitchell (1990), and Paldam (1991) all reached similarly pessimistic conclusions about heterogeneity in economic voting. The title of Paldam's contribution 'How Robust is the Vote Function? A Study of Seventeen Nations over Four Decades' conveys both his research question and the data that he used to try to answer it. The start of his conclusion communicates both his frustration with the findings of his study and his hopes that a way forward can be found:

The whole argument above is that the VP-function [Vote Popularity] is a function that is on the one hand unstable and, on the other hand, often highly significant. This combination has led to great research efforts, for the combination of significance and instability appears to suggest that we are missing one little trick that would make the function stable. It may be a mathematical reformulation, the inclusion of a crucial missing variable, or something else; once the trick has succeeded, everything is pushed forward with a full decimal point. There is, of course, a great incentive to write the paper presenting the trick. It would surely be one of the most quoted papers – so I am trying. (Paldam 1991, pp. 28–29)

Paldam went on to suggest that the solution to the instability of economic voting results might require more than a ‘little’ trick, emphasizing the need for a combination of deep theoretical thinking about the micro-foundations of economic voting and the collection of better data, especially on political aspects of economic voting models.

Responding to this heterogeneous evidence of economic voting in these pioneering cross-national studies, Powell and Whitten (1993) suggested that the influence of perceived economic performance on a voter’s choice might vary with the political institutional context. More specifically, Powell and Whitten posited that the influence of the economy on voting behavior would be strongest when the combination of institutional arrangements and the parties holding power across powerful institutions is such that it is clear in the minds of voters who is responsible for recent economic performances.

The dotted lines in Figure 5.2 depict the expected conditioning relationship of this variable, labeled ‘clarity of responsibility’, on economic voting, which led to the following expectations:

- When responsibility for policy-making is clear, economic voting relationships will be strongest.
- When responsibility for policy-making is clouded by institutional settings, coalition government, and other circumstances, economic voting relationships will be weaker or non-existent.

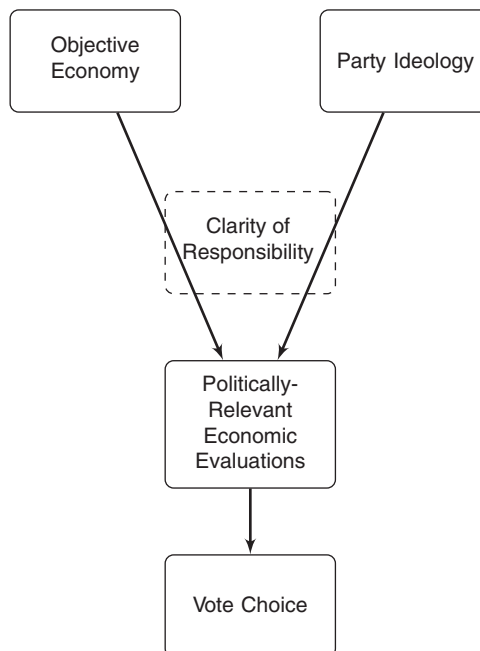


Figure 5.2 Economic voting with clarity of responsibility

In order to measure this conditioning variable, Powell and Whitten relied heavily on studies about the diffusion of political power, particularly the work of Arend Lijphart (1984). In his contrast between Westminster and Consensus models of democracy, Lijphart argues that the Consensus model can be characterized as a system in which the power is shared, dispersed, and restrained. The Consensus model of democracy would restrain the rule by a legislative majority through factors such as executive power-sharing in broad coalition cabinets, legislative bicameralism, minority representation with veto powers, multi-party systems, federalism, and decentralization (Lijphart 1984, pp. 23–9; p. 67; p. 90; p. 106).¹

Powell and Whitten argued that each of these factors which Lijphart identified as restraining majority rule can also potentially make responsibility for policy outcomes less clear. They built an initial measure of clarity of responsibility, in which one point was added based on the presence of each of the following conditions: ‘weakly cohesive parties, opposition sharing of committee chairs, opposition control of policymaking institution, pure minority government, and each additional (competing) party added to the governing coalition’ (Powell and Whitten 1993, p. 406). They then calculated the average value of this ‘lack of clarity’ scale for each country election in their sample, and divided countries into a high-clarity sample if this average value was less than 2.0, and a low-clarity sample otherwise. They estimated economic voting models on these two samples and compared the results. As expected, their results indicated strong economic voting in the high-clarity sample and weak to non-existent economic voting in the low-clarity sample.

IMPACT, EXTENSIONS, AND DISAGREEMENTS IN THE ECONOMIC VOTING LITERATURE

As discussed in the previous section, Powell and Whitten’s theory of clarity of responsibility came directly out of a puzzle in the economic voting literature. The most optimistic reading of this paper and its role in the subsequent economic voting literature would be that the theory presented in it was the one ‘little’ trick that Martin Paldam was calling for in 1991. But even if this is the case, it is clear from the number of citations of this paper, as depicted in Figure 5.3, and the volume of subsequent work in the economic voting literature on clarity of responsibility, that important questions remain about how clarity of responsibility works. In this section, we provide a brief discussion of some of the work in this area. Given the volume of citations, this section is certainly not intended to be an exhaustive review of the relevant literature. Instead, we have selected a broad range of publications on economic voting in which clarity of responsibility plays a central theoretical role.

Several studies, with different levels of data aggregation and refinements on the original concept of ‘clarity of responsibility’, have reinforced the

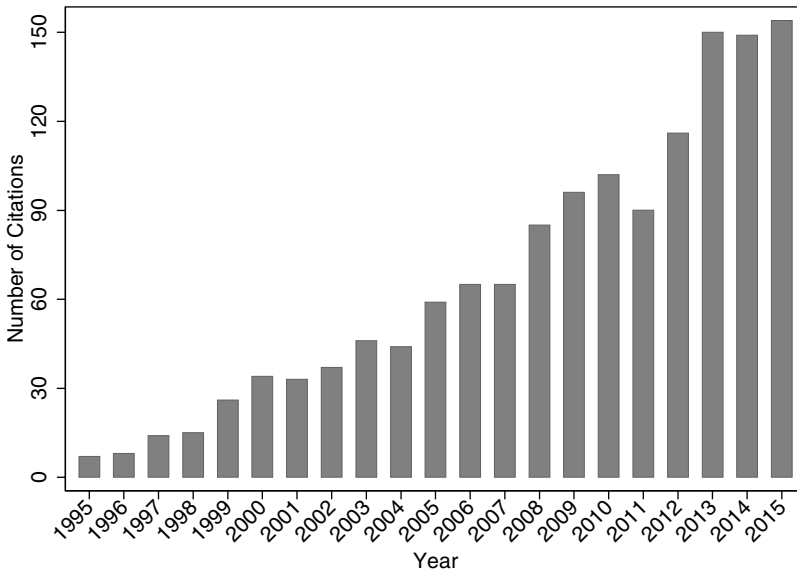


Figure 5.3 Google Scholar citations of Powell and Whitten (1993)

aggregate findings of Powell and Whitten (e.g. Palmer and Whitten 1999). Anderson (2000), analyzing survey data from 13 European countries, also reinforced Powell and Whitten's results (1993). Due to its unusual combination of political institutions, particularly its dual governance system, France has been an interesting case for analyzing the effect of 'clarity of responsibility' on economic voting. In semi-presidential systems, such as France, the executive power consists of a president and a prime minister. This duality of the executive branch can lead to a 'cohabitation' scenario where the president is from a different political party than the prime minister. This can be seen as a special kind of divided government, because under such a context the power share is not only between branches – i.e. executive versus legislative branch – but also within the executive. Studies on economic voting in France reveal that, under cohabitation, voters' attributions of responsibility for the country's economic performance shift from the president to the prime minister (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2000). These studies also reveal that cohabitation is an important factor in reducing the effect of the economic vote (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2004).

Other studies have proposed additional theoretical components of clarity of responsibility. Bengtsson (2004), for instance, adding two more contextual factors (volatility and turnout) to the concept of 'clarity of responsibility', also reaffirmed that economic voting only appears (or is more likely) under clear responsibility contexts. In an exploration of whether there might yet be some forms of economic voting in less clear responsibility settings, Williams and

Whitten (2015) developed a theory that combined elements from Downs' (1957) theory of spatial party competition with economic voting. They found evidence of spatial contagion effects in less clear electoral settings, which indicated that there may yet be a form of economic voting in these settings.

Inevitably, there have been a number of critiques of the theory and suggestions of alternative research strategies. One of the biggest questions that has been raised is the degree to which clarity of responsibility applies in presidential democracies. Much of the first work along these lines has come from studies of the United States. Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001), for instance, found no support for the idea that divided government blurs clarity of responsibility. They found that voters tend to blame the president for the national economic outcomes regardless of whether the legislature is controlled by her allies or her rivals (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001, p. 171). Norpoth (2001) also found evidence suggesting that a divided government poses no obstacle to economic voting. According to his findings, when voters are faced with a divided government there is no evidence that they become incapable of assigning responsibility for economic outcomes. Rather, under a divided government, voters (at least American voters, according to the author's research) tend to solve the problem by absolving the congress and assigning responsibility for the economy to the president (Norpoth 2001, p. 415; p. 426). In a broader comparative study of clarity of responsibility in presidential systems, Samuels (2004) argued that clarity of responsibility functions differently under presidentialism. His main findings were that executive elections are always shaped by the economy but that the degree to which the economy influences legislative elections in presidential systems is largely determined by whether or not legislative elections are held at the same time as elections for the executive.

Some results from studies on post-communist countries also contradict the clarity of responsibility theory. Coffey (2013) suggested that voters in these settings will use economic indicators to punish or reward the incumbent government only if the economic conditions exceed a certain level of 'pain tolerance' for the voters. Using aggregate-level data from the Czech Republic, she found that voters do not punish strong governments more intensely, nor do they consider the left-right political spectrum when attributing responsibility to the actors responsible for economic outcomes, and they do not always punish the incumbent for bad economic conditions.

A variety of other efforts have focused on the refinement and/or expansion of the measure of clarity of responsibility. According to Royed, Leyden and Borrelli (2000, p. 678; p. 683), a more parsimonious measure of 'clarity of responsibility' – that is, whether a government is a single-party or a coalition government – is a sufficient measure of the underlying concept. On the other hand, some studies have suggested that clarity of responsibility could be a function of more variables rather than fewer. Duch and Stevenson (2010, pp. 120–1), for instance, found evidence that more open economies lead to a significantly

smaller economic voting effect. Their argument was that open economies, which are more subject to exogenous economic shocks, seem to weaken the competency signal and, consequently, drive these countries to a smaller economic vote effect. In a similar way, by analyzing data from 17 Latin American countries, Alcañiz and Hellwig (2011) reveal that, as the number of actors whom citizens may blame for economic outcomes – including world markets, international institutions, and foreign banks – increases, voters' responsibility attributions become more dispersed. This finding supports the results of previous studies on the impact of globalization on economic voting (Hellwig and Samuels 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2010).

A number of studies have tried to expand or refine the role of clarity of responsibility in economic voting by focusing on the micro-level foundations. Anderson (2006) explored the ways in which clarity of responsibility operates when citizens face multiple levels of governance. In his terms, Powell and Whitten (1993) and others who focused mainly on the national government were analyzing horizontal clarity. In addition, Anderson assesses the impact of what he terms 'vertical clarity' by looking at how citizens respond to different degrees of federalism. Using survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Anderson found that, in countries where multi-level governance is prominent, economic voting becomes correspondingly weaker.

Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012) and Hobolt and Tilley (2013) used survey data to extend the logic of clarity of responsibility to the supra-national level. They studied individual-level relative assessments of responsibility attributions between the European Union and their national governments. Based on data from Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece, and Portugal), Lobo and Lewis-Beck found that, as citizens' perception of the European Union's responsibility for economic outputs increases, the national economic vote in these countries diminishes. Hobolt and Tilley, in turn, found that citizens are responsive to institutional context and can distinguish between the European Union and their national government's degree of responsibility across different policy domains, such as monetary policy, health care and climate change.

Parker-Stephen (2013) also refined the concept of clarity of responsibility, using it as a moderator variable on voters' partisanship and their economic evaluations. By analyzing survey data from 11 Western democracies, Parker-Stephen found that, in high-clarity contexts, a motivated economic reasoning, i.e. the association between economic beliefs and partisanship support, by the voter is stronger. Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci (2013), in turn, advocate for two distinct dimensions of the clarity of responsibility: an institutional clarity, i.e. the formal dispersion of institutional power among the government branches, and a government clarity, i.e. the cohesion of the incumbent government. According to the authors' results from survey data from 27 European countries, voters' responsibility assignment and electoral accountability are based primarily on the government clarity rather than on the institutional clarity.

In one of the first uses of experimental data to explore the micro-foundations of clarity of responsibility, Duch, Przepiorka and Stevenson (2015) studied responsibility attribution in circumstances where outcomes were the result of collective decisions that were made by a weighted vote among decision makers, yet the influence of any sole decision maker would have been irrelevant or imperceptible. The authors gathered these data by using collective *dictator games* in which recipients could punish individual decision makers whom the recipients perceived as part of the collective dictator. Under these circumstances, the authors found that individuals apply those responsibility attribution principles to collective decisions made by similar groups, such as families, boards in international organizations, or coalition governments. They found little evidence that recipients punish decision makers with veto power, or that the punishments are proportional to vote share. Their study shows that recipients will punish what they deem to be unfair allocations and will blame the decision maker who holds the power to propose allocation and who has the largest vote share. According to the results of the online component of their experiments, the belief that the decision maker with proposal power held the most control over the collective decision outcome was a prevalent belief among the participants.

Although the original purpose of Powell and Whitten's article (1993) was to address a puzzle in the economic voting literature, work by Margit Tavits (2007) demonstrates that the concept of 'clarity of responsibility' applies well to other areas of research. To explain variation in corruption across democratic nations, Tavits makes an argument that politicians in nations with high levels of clarity of responsibility face greater incentives to pursue policies that reduce corruption. She finds substantial support for her theory in empirical tests on data from parliamentary and semi-presidential democracies of the OECD and Eastern Europe. In a recent book, Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits (2016) extend the theory and tests of Tavits (2007) and found further evidence of this negative relationship between clarity of responsibility and corruption.

CONCLUSION

Although it is a relatively new theory about how institutions shape voting behavior, the theory of clarity of responsibility has had substantial influence and generated a wide range of interesting questions in the study of economic voting. While there have been some questions about the best measures of this concept and its applicability to presidential democracies, the basic theoretical propositions put forward by Powell and Whitten in 1993 have generally been supported. So an obvious question is, what is left to be done with this theory?

Clearly more work needs to be done on clarity of responsibility in presidential democracies. As discussed above, there is some evidence, particularly from

work in the United States, that this concept does not apply well to presidential systems. In the case of presidential democracies, the argument seems to be more about whether or not the status of the chief executive makes all such cases high in terms of clarity of responsibility. But there are clearly substantial variations across presidential democracies in terms of the power of presidents, institutional arrangements, and party systems.

Another area needing more work is the study of what is occurring in settings where there is less clarity of responsibility. The extant theory is essentially about what is *not* going to occur in such cases. And, although the empirical evidence certainly supports the proposition that low-clarity cases will provide less evidence of economic voting, this is a finding that begs the question of just what *is* happening in these cases. This question becomes more acute when we consider that the countries that tend to fall into this categorization generally have higher levels of voter turnout and a broader ideological menu of parties for voters to choose from. Recent work by Williams and Whitten (2015) is an example of work along these lines.

As the recent work by Leslie Schwindt-Bayer and Margit Tavits (2016) demonstrates, clarity of responsibility has the potential to travel beyond economic voting. What other important policy dynamics might be influenced by variations in clarity?

Note

- 1 Similarly, according to Tsebelis' veto players theory, which focuses on how the policy-making process operates, the greater the number (and the ideological distance) of veto players in the decision-making process – by bicameralism, coalition government or the requirement of qualified majorities – the more diffused the power of the government (Tsebelis 2002, p. 157; p. 185).

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