Partisanship and Blame in a Federal System

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Abstract: Elections are thought to provide a means for voters to hold politicians responsible for their behavior in office. But in the United States, voters directly elect dozens of politicians: Presidents, members of Congress, governors, legislators, mayors, and so on. How do voters decide which politician to blame for which policy outcomes? In some policy areas, one particular office may have a clear "functional responsibility," making blame easy to assign. But in many policy areas--economic development in particular--responsibility is shared. I examine how voters allocate blame between the president and their governor for economic conditions in their state. Using three sources of survey data, I find a consistent result: Voters assign blame for economic conditions in an essentially partisan manner, particularly when the president and the governor belong to opposing parties. In that situation, voters blame whichever level of government that is not controlled by their own party.

The United States is unique among democracies in the burden it imposes upon its voters.[1] Not only are American elections frequent, but they feature a dizzying number of choices. In California, often an extreme example of this tendency, voters in 2006 had to evaluate thirteen proposed initiatives in addition to candidates for two federal offices (one House, one Senate), seven statewide executive offices, two state legislative offices (one Assembly, one state Senate), and various judgeships. As if that were not enough, most voters would also have found on their ballots candidates for their city council, county board of supervisors, school board, and other (often obscure) local elected offices.

The difficulties created by such a complex hyper-democratic system have given rise to entire literatures dealing with voter fatigue, ballot rolloff, and voters' information resources.[2] However, the presence of so many independently-elected officials, often with overlapping responsibilities, creates an additional problem: Blame. Elections are thought to provide a link whereby voters can hold elected officials responsible for their activities in office. But when something goes wrong—unemployment is high, schools are poor, or crime is up—how do voters know which of all these politicians to hold responsible?

My argument, detailed below, is that Americans rely heavily on partisan shortcuts when assigning responsibility for policy successes and failures—especially when authority for a policy is not clearly assigned to a single political office. By itself, this argument is not completely novel; previous research has shown that voters tend to have more patience with politicians of their own party than with politicians from the other side. However, these studies have generally examined only one office (e.g. the

[1] I thank Gary Jacobson for his data and advice. For feedback in this project's early stages I thank Craig Burnett, Matt Childers, Mike Binder, and Keith Poole.

[2] Among others, see Bullock and Dunn (1996), Lupia (1994), Matson and Fine (2006), Rallings et al. (2003), Walker (1966), Wattenberg et al. (2000).

presidency) or only one level of government (e.g. Congress versus the president). Such an approach overlooks the many other layers of governmental authority that voters evaluate on election day. What is lacking is an understanding of partisanship and blame in America's federal system.

To examine all the diverse and complicated layers of authority would be beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I pay primary attention to the most prominent politician at each level of American federalism: Presidents and governors. When the president and the governor belong to the same party, the blame game between them is not particularly interesting. But when they belong to different parties, voters gain the opportunity to blame one while giving the other a free pass. This does not mean that voters will completely ignore each office's responsibilities; even the least-engaged citizen knows that governors have as little control over foreign policy as presidents have over state sentencing guidelines. Rather, my argument is that partisan considerations will determine allocations of blame in the many policy areas where the president and the governor share responsibility. Just as divided government creates a potential blame game between the president and Congress, divided federalism creates a similar situation between the president and the governors.

Previous Work on Partisan Bias and Federalism

These arguments incorporate insights from two separate literatures. The first is the long-standing literature about partisanship and bias alluded to already. This literature began decades ago with the "funnel model" of partisanship introduced in *The American Voter* (Campbell et a. 1960); an updated take on this argument is that voters simply reject

information that challenges their prior beliefs (Zaller 1992), or that they choose to give greater credibility to information from sources they trust (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987), even if those sources are potentially biased. Regardless of which of these mechanisms produces partisan bias, we have evidence that the biases exist. First, we have evidence that partisanship colors voter evaluations of policy outcomes: Conover, Feldman, and Knight have provided detailed evidence that retrospective (1986) and prospective (1987) economic evaluations strongly reflect respondents' political views, arguing that these evaluations "become extensions of partisan evaluations of the president's capabilities" (1987, 578). A similar story arises with regard to consumer confidence surveys; although actual economic conditions have a strong impact on consumer confidence, political evaluations also play a significant role (DeBoef and Kellstedt 2004). In addition, we have evidence that partisan factors influence whether voters will consider economic conditions when voting in Congressional elections (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Fiorina 1983).

All of these findings have come from research primarily concerned with the national setting; these insights have not been fully applied to the subnational context. In filling this gap, I also draw on a second body of research: The literature on gubernatorial approval and elections. Most research in this field has asked whether voters hold governors accountable for local (i.e. state-level) conditions or whether governors are entirely at the mercy of the president's coattails. Few dispute that national partisan trends influence gubernatorial approval and elections; the question is whether local conditions also matter. Those arguing that only national conditions matter imply, in effect, that voters blame the president for every policy outcome, at any level, and evaluate all

subnational politicians based on the president's performance (e.g. Crew and Weiher 1996; Peltzman 1987). Those arguing that local conditions also matter imply that voters have some standard by which to assign responsibility for some policies to the governor even while assigning responsibility for other policies to the president. The reigning argument at present is that voters accomplish this task with reference to each office's "functional responsibilities," expecting presidents to provide national security and Social Security while expecting governors to provide education, highways, and economic growth (Atkeson and Partin 1995, 2001; Arceneaux 2006). Although various analysts disagree as to what these functional differences are (e.g. Carsey and Wright 1998), the basic claim is that voters perceive objective differences between the duties of presidents and governors and vote accordingly.

My argument modifies the functional responsibility hypothesis by introducing insights from the literature on partisanship and bias. Although some policy areas clearly fall within the domain of either the president or the governor, responsibility is murkier in other policy areas. When responsibilities are clearly divided, it seems likely that we would observe voter behaviors roughly consistent with the functional responsibility argument. But when responsibilities are unclear, as is often the case, I expect the literature on partisanship and bias to become relevant; in this situation, presidential, gubernatorial, and voter partisanship interact to determine which level of government the voter will chose to blame.

To test this argument, I pay close attention to a policy area where responsibility is especially murky: Economics. In an ideal world, presidents would bear responsibility for the national economy's strength as a whole, while governors would bear responsibility

only for the state's economic health (relative to the nation's). In the real world, however, voters are not unbiased. Rudolph (2003) has already shown that partisan considerations affect whether a voter will blame Congress or the president for national economic conditions. My central claim is that American federalism creates a similar blame game between governors and the president: Voters will tend to blame whichever level of government that is not controlled by their own party.

I begin by developing this argument more fully, deriving specific hypotheses from a re-analysis of Stein's (1990) study of the 1982 gubernatorial elections. I then test these hypotheses using two dependent variables measured in 2006. First, I ask whether partisan biases influence voter evaluations of their state's economy relative to the nation's. Consistent with expectations, I find that voters show strong partisan biases in their economic evaluations when the governor and president belong to different parties; when the governor and president belong to the same party, partisan biases evaporate, as intuition suggests they should. Second, I ask whether partisan biases determine whether state economics correlate with gubernatorial approval. Using two separate surveys, I find that they do. When the governor and president belong to different parties, respondents of the governor's party do not reflect state unemployment in their gubernatorial approval ratings, while respondents of the president's party do. When the governor and president belong to the same party, these partisan patterns weaken.

Four Hypotheses about Partisanship and Blame

In the literature on gubernatorial approval and elections, researchers have been split between those arguing that national political conditions alone influence

gubernatorial approval and those arguing that local conditions also matter. Although presidential popularity and national economic trends have been found to significantly influence gubernatorial elections in almost every study, the effects of state economics and other local conditions have been inconsistent from one study to the next. In part, these inconsistencies may arise from a widespread (but implicit) assumption that if local conditions matter, all voters will take equal account of them when evaluating the governor.

Stein (1990) was the first to challenge this assumption, arguing that economic considerations should hurt the incumbent's approval rating only among those respondents who actually blame the governor for current economic conditions; among respondents who blame the national government, by contrast, economic considerations should not affect their evaluation of the governor. Although Stein was able to confirm this hypothesis empirically using exit poll data from the 1982 gubernatorial elections, he was surprised that so few voters actually blamed the governor for their state's economic problems. Nevertheless, he did not seek to explain this puzzle, choosing instead to treat blame as exogenous. Table 1 replicates one of Stein's tables, summarizing how voters in each state chose to assign blame for the state's economy. Only in California, New York, and Nevada did more respondents blame their governor than blamed Ronald Reagan (as indicated with bold type).

Table 1: Who is Responsible for the Economic Problems in Your State?

State	Reagan	Governor	Both	Neither
All states	25.4	15.4	18.4	34.5
California	**28.4**	**36.3**	17.1	18.3
Connecticut	32.4	15.8	12.4	39.5
Maine	37.7	13.7	12.2	36.5
Massachusetts	24.3	11.3	24.3	40.2
Michigan	20.0	14.5	25.7	39.9
Minnesota	19.5	13.2	27.0	40.3
Nebraska	16.6	9.8	21.9	51.7
Nevada	**14.4**	**17.2**	22.3	46.1
New Mexico	34.0	15.6	13.1	37.4
New York	**27.1**	**27.6**	27.2	18.3
Ohio	26.2	10.3	23.1	40.3
Rhode Island	42.4	14.0	13.4	30.2
Tennessee	34.5	6.8	22.5	36.3
Texas	19.4	9.3	19.8	51.5
Vermont	28.4	5.7	15.0	50.8
Wyoming	29.4	11.4	8.2	51.0

Note: Bold type is for emphasis only; see text. Reprinted from Stein (1990, Table 4), based on the 1982 CBS News/*New York Times* exit polls.

As a side note, these data are potentially problematic; many respondents blamed neither Reagan nor their governor, which may reflect a problem with the question. Stein uses the 1982 CBS News/*New York Times* exit polls, which asked, "Who's more to blame for economic problems in (name of state): President Reagan, Governor (incumbent's name), both, or neither?" Perhaps some of those attributing responsibility to "neither" thought there were no economic problems to blame on anyone, or that any problems that did exist arose independently of government policies.[3]

Setting aside this concern about the data, Stein was nevertheless smart to consider the importance of blame. His work inspired the later research on functional responsibility

[3] For example, Rudolph (2003) found that many respondents will blame labor or business leaders for economic problems, given the opportunity to do so.

discussed above. All the same, Stein failed to appreciate the importance of partisanship in determining these attributions of blame. Table 2 presents Stein's data divided by partisan subgroup, an analytic step Stein did not take. This simple change makes it apparent that blame strongly reflects respondent partisanship. In every state with a Democratic governor, Republicans blamed their governors and Democrats blamed Reagan, a Republican; in every state with a Republican governor, Republicans blamed neither Reagan nor the governor, and Democrats blamed Reagan or (more frequently) both. And across the board, Republicans were more likely to claim that neither Reagan nor the governor was to blame, or perhaps that there were no problems to blame on anybody.

Table 2: By Partisan Subgroup: Who is Responsible for Economic Problems?

	Republican Respondents				Democratic Respondents			
State	Reagan	Gov	Both	Neither	Reagan	Gov	Both	Neither
Democratic Governors								
CA	11.6	59.4	10.2	18.9	43.6	20.2	21.6	14.7
CT	10.9	26.8	10.9	51.5	52.9	9.7	11.8	25.7
ME	15.9	24.3	12.4	47.4	60.8	6.8	10.7	21.7
MA	8.6	20.1	5.1	66.2	35.7	8.8	30.3	25.2
NM	11.4	27.1	7.5	53.9	51.2	9.0	16.7	23.1
NY	13.2	45.3	19.7	21.9	40.5	14.8	32.5	12.2
RI	11.2	34.1	10.0	44.7	66.3	9.6	8.5	15.6
WY	9.4	17.0	8.0	65.7	55.8	5.8	7.7	30.7
Average	*11.5*	***31.8***	*10.5*	***46.3***	***50.9***	*10.6*	*17.5*	*21.1*
Republican Governors								
MN	7.0	12.3	11.0	69.7	30.4	13.6	40.0	16.0
MI	6.1	15.7	14.4	63.9	32.8	11.4	37.7	18.2
NE	7.6	8.1	9.5	74.8	26.9	11.9	39.5	21.7
NV	6.0	16.5	8.3	69.2	23.3	18.2	34.6	24.0
OH	8.3	10.5	11.7	69.6	40.7	9.2	31.2	19.0
TN	16.2	3.6	7.8	72.5	47.2	8.7	30.5	13.6
TX	6.3	4.8	4.2	84.7	31.9	12.2	32.8	23.1
VE	9.9	6.1	7.7	76.2	49.6	7.1	21.1	22.2
Average	*8.4*	*9.7*	*9.3*	***72.6***	***35.4***	*11.5*	***33.4***	*19.7*

Note: Averages are not weighted. Bold type is for emphasis only; see text. Data source: The 1982 CBS News/*New York Times* exit polls, obtained from ICPSR.

It appears, then, that respondent partisanship shaped attributions of blame in 1982; in turn, Stein's work shows that these attributions determined whether economic evaluations affected governors at election time. These partisan patterns were most obvious where the governor was a Democrat, since respondents could choose to blame either the Democratic governor or the Republican president. Where the governor was a Republican, the patterns were murkier; with both the governor and the president belonging to the same party, respondents were less sure whether to blame both or neither. This is particularly true of Republican respondents. Their declaration that "neither" was

responsible may reflect no more than a hesitation to admit that their own party's politicians had failed them. If "neither" were not presented as an option, or if the question were rephrased to ask who was "responsible" for the economy rather than who was to "blame," Stein might have found more Republicans willing to blame either Reagan or a Republican governor. As it stands, the high proportion of "neither" responses makes it difficult to make a clear statement about this group of respondents.

Because the following analysis will make frequent reference to these four partisan patterns, I summarize them here for clarity:

- Republican respondents with Democratic governors held the governor accountable for any economic problems they perceived in their state, if they perceived any problems at all;
- Democrats with Democratic governors did not hold the governor accountable, preferring to blame Reagan;
- Republicans with Republican governors either ignored economic difficulties or blamed them on something other than the government, but it is unclear which office they would have blamed had the question been phrased differently;
- Democrats with Republican governors blamed either the president alone or the president and the governor together.

The 2006 gubernatorial elections took place in a similar context as the 1982 elections: The economy was generally seen as weak, and the president was a Republican. This serendipitous similarity affords us the methodologically important opportunity to test hypotheses developed in one context (the 1982 elections) by applying them to a new one (the 2006 elections). Each of the four patterns listed above becomes a hypothesis

about 2006 in the analysis below. These four patterns lead to the sharpest predictions about respondents with Democratic governors; where the governor was a Republican in 2006, a wider variety of respondent behaviors could be consistent with these four patterns.

I use two data sources to test these claims about partisanship and bias. First, I employ the individual-level survey data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), fielded by Polimetrix during the November 2006 elections. This survey involved over 30,000 respondents answering questions on dozens of topics. Later, I use aggregate gubernatorial approval data collected by SurveyUSA in monthly surveys from May 2005 through November 2006. Although neither pollster included questions explicitly asking respondents to blame either the governor or the president for economic conditions in their state, these surveys do include other questions that allow us to see the same partisan mechanisms at play. In particular, I apply the four hypotheses above to two separate voter judgments. First, I demonstrate that respondent evaluations of the state economy's strength strongly reflected partisan biases; voters had a rosier view of their state's economy when such a view accorded with their partisan predispositions, regardless of actual macroeconomic conditions in the state. Second, I show that the relationship between gubernatorial approval and state unemployment rates varies according to respondent partisanship. These partisan biases may explain why researchers investigating the effects of economic problems on gubernatorial approval have failed to find a consistent (aggregate) effect of state unemployment on gubernatorial approval and election results.

Applying the Four Hypotheses to Economic Evaluations

CCES respondents were asked to evaluate their state's economic health over the previous year. They answered a similar question about the national economy. Both questions used a closed-form response ranging over a five-point scale from "much better" and "better" to "worse" and "much worse." By subtracting national evaluations from state evaluations, we can construct an index measure of each respondent's evaluation of the state's economy relative to the nation's. This new measure ranges from -4 (the state economy is much worse than the national economy) to +4, though scores fall between -2 and +2 (inclusive) for 97% of respondents.

This composite measure makes better empirical and theoretical sense than using evaluations of the state economy alone. First, it makes empirical sense since it eliminates the need for several control variables. A respondent's employment status and other demographic variables might influence the respondent's general optimism about the economy at any level, state or national. Assuming that these pocketbook concerns bias a respondent's two evaluations by equal measures, then subtracting one from the other removes the effect of these demographic considerations, leaving us with a "purer" measure of the respondent's perception of the state's economy relative to the nation's.[4] Second and more importantly, though, this index measure also makes theoretical sense, given that the four hypotheses speak specifically of how respondents evaluate their state relative to the nation—not how they evaluate the state in isolation.

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[4] Because respondents have only five options when evaluating either the state or national economy, it is possible that an extremely optimistic respondent could give the highest score to the nation but find herself unable to give an even higher score to the state. To verify that this potentiality did not skew any of the results below, I repeated all these analysis omitting the 4,474 respondents who gave the best (or worst) possible evaluation both to their state and to the nation; the substantive conclusions were the same.

Another advantage of this composite measure is that it has a correct answer that each respondent ought to have given, regardless of personal political beliefs: Either the state economy was stronger than the national one or it was not. In a world of perfectly informed citizens, therefore, raw macroeconomic indicators should predict most, if not all, of the variance in this measure. That is, respondents should rate their state's economy as stronger than the nation's only if it is, in fact, stronger. This ideal represents the null hypothesis. The four patterns listed earlier lead us to the alternative hypotheses. As applied here, the prediction is that respondents with Democratic governors will exhibit considerable bias toward either their state economy (for Democratic respondents) or the national economy (for Republican respondents) in order to favor the level governed by their own party. By contrast, respondents with Republican governors have no reason to favor either level over the other; we predict no bias among these respondents.

Consistent with the hypotheses under consideration, economic evaluations reflected respondent partisanship, as shown in Table 3. For clarity, national evaluations are collapsed from five categories to three; evaluations of the state relative to the nation are reduced from nine categories to three.[5] Republicans revealed their faith in George Bush by giving the national economy strong reviews—stronger than they gave their state economies. Democrats revealed their opposition to Bush by giving the economy weak reviews—weaker than they gave their state economies. Among Democrats, 35.5% claimed that their state outperformed the nation over the previous year; among Republicans, 40.9% made the opposite claim.

[5] The "about the same" category represents composite scores between -1 and 1. The remaining categories represent more extreme scores.

Table 3: CCES Economic Evaluations, by Respondent Partisanship

	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Row average
National economic evaluations				
Gotten better	7.1%	22.1%	73.0%	*36.9%*
Stayed about the same	24.6%	24.4%	16.4%	*21.1%*
Gotten worse	68.4%	53.4%	10.6%	*42.0%*
Column total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
State versus national economy				
State worse than nation	12.7%	21.4%	40.9%	*25.7%*
About the same	51.8%	53.1%	49.8%	*51.1%*
State better than nation	35.5%	25.5%	9.3%	*23.2%*
Column total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

Note: "Democrat" and "Republican" include partisan leaners; only "pure" independents are listed as such. Pearson's chi^2 has $p<0.001$ for both parts of the table. Gamma is -0.80 for the top part, -0.53 for the bottom. 34,674 respondents.

Of course, this table is insufficient to test the four hypotheses under consideration; it could simply be that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to live in states that actually did perform poorly in 2006. To test the four hypotheses, we need to calculate the degree and direction of inaccuracy in each respondent's evaluation of her state economy relative to the nation's by comparing respondent evaluations to actual economic conditions in the respondent's state. To do so, I standardize each state's unemployment rate and also each respondent's evaluation of the state's economy relative to the nation's; I then subtract the former from the latter.[6] The resulting measure of bias is positive for respondents who overestimate their state's economic health, with a mean of 0.2 and a standard deviation of 1.2. Table 4 summarizes this new variable, collapsing it into five

[6] Before standardization, state unemployment rates had mean 4.46 with standard deviation 1.04 (N=50). To make the bias measure easier to interpret, I multiply this standardized variable by -1. Respondent evaluations had mean -0.07 with standard deviation 1.03 (N=35,197); these figures are essentially the same regardless of whether sampling weights are applied. Standardization results in mean 0.0 with standard deviation of 1.0 for both variables.

categories for readability. A large majority (62%) evaluated their state's economic performance with minimal bias; the remainder was evenly divided between those giving their state economy too much (22%) or too little (17%) praise.

Table 4: Respondent Bias in Evaluating the State Economy

	Number of Respondents	Percent
Strong positive bias (2 or higher)	2,424	7%
Positive bias (1 to 2)	5,271	15%
Unbiased (-1 to 1)	21,679	62%
Negative bias (-1 to -2)	4,417	13%
Strong negative bias (-2 or lower)	1,406	4%

Respondent partisanship correlates strongly with this measure of bias; Table 5 shows column percentages for each partisan subgroup, with bold print indicating cells containing an unusually high percentage of respondents. For readability, both variables in this table are collapsed to three categories. The relationship between partisanship and bias fits the hypotheses most neatly where the governor was a Democrat in 2006. In these states Democratic respondents tended to overestimate the state's economic health relative to the nation's, while Republicans did the opposite. Strength of partisanship appears to make little difference; even when partisanship is measured using seven categories, partisan leaners behaved identically to strong partisans. These patterns are both substantively and statistically significant (see note, Table 5).

Table 5: Partisan Sources of Bias

	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Row average
Democratic Governors				
Positive bias (1 or higher)	**41.8%**	25.3%	7.6%	*25.5%*
Unbiased	52.2%	62.8%	60.7%	*60.7%*
Negative bias (-1 or lower)	6.0%	12.0%	**31.7%**	*17.5%*
Column total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Republican Governors				
Positive bias (1 or higher)	25.7%	22.5%	11.8%	*19.4%*
Unbiased	63.6%	62.9%	66.3%	*64.7%*
Negative bias (-1 or lower)	10.7%	14.6%	21.9%	*16.0%*
Column total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

Note: Column percentages shown. Boldface is for emphasis only; see text. For respondents with Democratic governors, N=14,029; chi^2=2700 ($p<0.001$); gamma=-0.65 (ASE=0.009). For respondents with Republican governors, N=20,645; chi^2=844 ($p<0.001$); gamma=-0.33 (ASE=0.011).

Where the governor was a Republican, though, respondents did not behave exactly as predicted, at least not when viewed in this aggregate form. Because these governors belong to the same party as the president, the hypotheses given earlier would predict that respondent partisanship would not matter at all in these states. However, we do in fact observe a weak partisan pattern; Democrats continued to evaluate their state economies more favorably than Republicans did, although the trend is far less pronounced than in the top half of the table. This odd result would seem to run counter to my hypotheses.

Regardless, this unexpected result is not genuine; it is an artifact of the electorate's intensely polarized feelings about George W. Bush. Among Democratic respondents, 87% (including leaners) claimed to "strongly disapprove" of Bush; only 8% felt sufficiently mild animus to merely "disapprove." Among Republicans, 44% approved of Bush and another 40% strongly approved. Unsurprisingly, respondents who strongly

disapproved of Bush gave the national economy the lowest evaluations (and vice versa), a finding in line with the previous research at the national level discussed earlier. They also tended to give their state economies lower marks than did other respondents. Crucially, however, state evaluations were influenced much less by Bush approval than national evaluations were.[7] As a result, presidential approval is the omitted variable that produces the artifactual result seen in the lower half of Table 5. When the table is replicated only for strong disapprovers of Bush (the modal category), as in Table 6, the partisan pattern disappears almost entirely—in accordance with the hypotheses presented earlier.[8]

Table 6: Partisan Sources of Bias among Strong Bush Disapprovers

	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Row average
Republican Governors				
Positive bias (1 or higher)	26.7%	27.9%	22.5%	*26.6%*
Unbiased	63.1%	60.4%	63.4%	*62.8%*
Negative bias (-1 or lower)	10.2%	11.7%	13.5%	*10.7%*
Column total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

Note: Column percentages shown. Respondents are strong Bush disapprovers in states with Republican governors. (Strong disapprovers are the modal group in these states, with 49.7% of respondents.) N=10,117; chi^2=14.66 (p=0.005); gamma=-0.04 (ASE=0.023).

The regression analyses in Table 7 confirm what these cross-tabulations suggest. Among those with a Democratic governor, Republican respondents had far gloomier perceptions of the state's economy relative to the nation's than Democratic respondents did, with politically independent respondents in the middle. Controlling for presidential approval weakens this relationship but does not eliminate it. Among respondents with a

[7] Bush approval and respondent partisanship alone (with interactions) explain 56% of the variance in evaluations of the national economy but only 24% of the variance in evaluations of the state economy.
[8] Shrewd readers will ask whether applying this same control for Bush approval in states with Democratic governors might also eliminate the positive result reported earlier; it does not, though it does cause gamma to fall from -0.48 to -0.22.

Republican governor, by contrast, there is only a weak relationship between partisanship and economic evaluations once presidential approval is taken into account; interacting Bush approval with respondent partisanship (not shown) weakens this estimated relationship still further, with the coefficient for Republican respondents dropping from -0.19 to -0.15.[9]

Table 7: Effects of Respondent Partisanship on Bias

	Democratic governor		Republican governor	
Independent respondent	-0.46***	-0.25***	-0.14***	-0.05
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Republican respondent	-1.29***	-0.53***	-0.50***	-0.19***
	(0.13)	(0.11)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Strongly Approve Bush		-1.18***		-0.46***
		(0.09)		(0.07)
Approve Bush		-0.76***		-0.35***
		(0.05)		(0.07)
Disapprove Bush		-0.38***		-0.17**
		(0.06)		(0.05)
Constant	0.79**	0.88***	0.41*	0.44*
	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.17)	(0.17)
N	13,859	13,859	20,412	20,412
Clusters (states)	22	22	28	28
R^2	0.21	0.26	0.05	0.06

Note: Cluster-corrected standard errors in parentheses; sampling weights applied. The dependent variable is the respondent's bias in evaluating the state's economy relative to the nation's. Democratic respondents and strong Bush disapprovers are the baseline categories. *p≤0.05, **p≤0.01, ***p≤0.001.

The general finding in this table is that respondents exhibited far greater partisan bias in their evaluations of the state's economy relative to the nation's when their governor did not belong to the president's party. This pattern persists under a variety of

[9] The fact that this partisan dummy is statistically significant in the first place may reflect some coarseness in the Bush approval measure. A Republican may be less willing to declare his disapproval of Bush than an equally dissatisfied Democrat. To the extent that the Bush approval variable's inability to fully control for feelings about Bush is correlated with respondent partisanship, the artifactual connection discussed earlier may continue to turn up.

specifications, using several control variables.[10] When it comes to respondent evaluations of the state's economy relative to the nation's, then, we observe results in line with our expectations. Where the governor and the president belonged to different parties, partisanship had a strong effect on respondent evaluations of the state's economy relative to the nation's; where the governor and the president belonged to the same party, partisanship had almost no effect.

Applying the Four Hypotheses to Gubernatorial Approval

The same patterns of partisanship and blame should also influence how respondents evaluate their governors. That is, the state's economic condition should have a stronger effect on gubernatorial popularity when such a judgment fits the respondent's existing partisan biases. Recall from the re-analysis of Stein's data in Table 2 that when the governor and the president belong to different parties, a typical respondent will blame whichever one does not belong to the respondent's party for economic conditions in the state. As applied in 2006, this pattern leads us to the following hypotheses:

- State unemployment will have a strong relationship with gubernatorial approval among Republican respondents with a Democratic governor.
- State unemployment will have a very weak relationship with gubernatorial approval among Democratic respondents with a Democratic governor.

[10] Given the large sample size, many controls were statistically significant but substantively inconsequential and therefore omitted. Controls included respondent income, race, marital status, gender, education, employment status, and home ownership. Controlling for each state's unemployment rate (and changing the dependent variable to evaluations of the state relative to the nation) makes no substantial difference. Nor does inserting a dummy for each state (rather than using cluster corrections) make a difference.

Now consider the case of respondents with a Republican governor. In 1982, Democratic respondents with Republican governors were evenly divided between blaming the president alone and blaming the president and the governor together for economic problems. Even though not all respondents assigned partial blame to the governor, a substantial portion did; as such, we should see a moderate relationship between state economics and gubernatorial approval among this group.

It is difficult to formulate such a straightforward prediction for Republican respondents with Republican governors, though. In 1982, an overwhelming majority of this group chose to blame neither the president nor the governor. If we took this finding at face value, then we would predict no relationship between state economics and gubernatorial approval among these respondents. As discussed earlier, however, it is unclear whether these respondents would have chosen to blame the governor if the question had been worded more neutrally, so as to encourage fewer responses of "neither." Since we do not know exactly what theses respondents were thinking when they blamed neither the governor nor the president, it is difficult to formulate a specific hypothesis about whether state economics will correlate with gubernatorial approval among these respondents. If these respondents truly do not blame their governor for economic problems in their state, then there will be no relationship; if they do blame them, but they simply had a more positive view of their state's economy than was assumed by the question wording, then there may be a significant relationship. As such, we remain somewhat agnostic about what to predict for this group.

Table 8 summarizes these four hypotheses for clarity; the strongest prediction concerns the difference between Republican and Democratic respondents when the

governor is a Democrat. I use two data sources to test these claims: The individual-level CCES data used in the previous section and aggregate data from SurveyUSA.[11] Both data sources produce consistent evidence supporting these hypotheses, with one exception: Among Republicans evaluating Republican governors, the estimated effect of state economics on gubernatorial approval is inconsistent and stronger than expected.

Table 8: Expected Effects of State Economics on Gubernatorial Approval

	Republican respondents	Democratic respondents
Republican governors	Probably weak	Moderate
Democratic governors	Strong	Very weak

Individual-Level Gubernatorial Approval: CCES

CCES respondents appraised their respective governors along a four point scale, from "strongly disapprove" and "disapprove" to "approve" and "strongly approve."[12] Although many diverse variables may affect the governor's popularity, the focus here is on the governor's responsibility for the state's macroeconomic health—in particular, its unemployment rate.[13]

Table 9 presents the results of four OLS regressions, one for each combination of gubernatorial and respondent partisanship. In each, the dependent variable is the

[11] For a detailed discussion of SurveyUSA and a defense of its reliability, see Brown (2007) and Jacobson (2006).
[12] Respondents choosing the "not sure" option are omitted from this analysis, since "not sure" can mean either "I don't know" or "neutral." The variable is coded from 1 through 4.
[13] Inflation rates are not available for individual states. Growth rates were also used, but they were insignificant in every instance.

respondent's evaluation of the governor.[14] The independent variables are the state's unemployment rate relative to the nation's (averaged from May through November 2006), a dummy for whether the respondent approves of Bush, and a vector of demographic control variables. Respondents from Louisiana are omitted; its political and economic volatility following Hurricane Katrina make its situation atypical.

Table 9: Gubernatorial Responsibility for the Economy in November 2006

	Republican governor		Democratic governor	
Respondent party (no leaners)	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
State unemployment	-0.28*	-0.18*	-0.22***	-0.05
	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Bush approver	-0.67***	-0.96***	0.53***	0.45***
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.09)
Demographic controls[a]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.08***	2.80***	1.66***	2.82***
	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.16)	(0.14)
N	4899	5087	3157	3338
Clusters (states)	28	28	21	21
R^2	0.15	0.11	0.10	0.04

Note: Cluster-corrected standard errors in parentheses; sampling weights applied. The dependent variable is the respondent's evaluation of the governor, measured on a four-point scale.
*p≤0.05, **p≤0.01, ***p≤0.001.
[a] Additional control variables not shown include respondent income and dummies for race, marriage, sex, education, home ownership, and employment status.

Three of the four patterns predicted in Table 8 appear in these results, although the overall fit in every case is poor. In states with a Democratic governor, the partisan difference is apparent; the state's unemployment rate had a clear effect on gubernatorial approval among Republican respondents but no measurable effect among Democratic

[14] Strictly speaking, ordered logit would be the most appropriate tool for predicting this ordinal four-category variable; however, OLS gives essentially the same results in this case.

respondents. In states with a Republican governor, state economics have a significant but moderate effect on approval among Democratic respondents.

Surprisingly, and contrary to expectations, state unemployment has the strongest estimated effect on approval among Republican respondents with Republican governors. The reason for this finding is not clear. The relationship is not quadratic; that is, it does not reflect Republicans taking account of unemployment only when it is low. At the same time, it is an uncertain finding; the 95% confidence interval around this estimate ranges from -0.52 to -0.05. Given the uncertainty around this unexpected finding, I will postpone further discussion of it until the analysis of SurveyUSA's aggregate approval data later in this paper.

Setting aside the one surprising finding, the results in Table 9 support the other three predictions given above. Still, the substantive effect of unemployment on individual-level gubernatorial approval should not be overstated. Recall that approval is measured on a four-point scale. Even among Republican respondents with Democratic governors, it would take a four- or five-point rise in unemployment to effect a one-point movement along the approval scale, other things being equal. Given that state unemployment rates had a range of only 4.6 points and a standard deviation of 1.04 during this period, such a swing is unlikely. Of course, these small individual-level effects might translate into dramatic aggregate effects; as the following section will show, even a small rise in unemployment turns out to be sufficient to make thousands of barely-satisfied approvers into disapprovers. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that even within partisan subgroups, there is a considerable amount of individual decision-making left unexplained.

Aggregate Gubernatorial Approval: SurveyUSA

Table 10 replicates the preceding analysis using aggregate gubernatorial approval data gathered by SurveyUSA.[15] The independent variables are state unemployment rates, with the national rate subtracted out; state-level approval ratings for George W. Bush among the specified partisan subgroup; and each state's number of electoral votes, logged, to account for population. The approval and unemployment measures are averages covering January through March 2006. Louisiana is again omitted, given the volatility following Hurricane Katrina.[16] New Jersey and Virginia are also omitted, since they held gubernatorial elections in November 2005 and their new governors were only beginning their terms during this period.

Table 10: Gubernatorial Responsibility for the Economy in Early 2006

	Republican governor		Democratic governor	
Respondent party	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
State unemployment	-6.13**	-6.59**	-11.85*	-5.53
	(1.93)	(2.07)	(5.65)	(3.40)
Bush approval level	0.42	0.11	1.76*	0.90†
	(0.46)	(0.67)	(0.71)	(0.47)
Logged electoral votes	-3.42	-9.84**	-3.81	1.65
	(3.14)	(3.37)	(6.85)	(4.51)
Constant	44.18	61.16***	-88.52	55.10***
	(37.84)	(12.64)	(55.95)	(10.83)
N	28	28	19	19
R^2 (adjusted)	0.37 (0.29)	0.48 (0.42)	0.58 (0.49)	0.42 (0.31)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the aggregate approval level among the specified group of respondents. $^{\dagger}p\leq0.10$, *$p\leq0.05$, **$p\leq0.01$, ***$p\leq0.001$.

[15] All gubernatorial and presidential approval ratings are measured only among those expressing an opinion.

[16] Although Katrina affected both Louisiana and Mississippi, only Louisiana is an outlier in these regressions.

These estimates provide results consistent with those in the previous table, with only one exception: The estimated effect among Republicans evaluating Republicans is considerably weaker here than in the previous results. In Table 9, the estimate for this group was unexpectedly high; in Table 10 the estimate lies closer to our expectations. I discuss this inconsistency below. For the other three groups, the estimated effect of state unemployment on approval conforms with the hypothesized expectations. State unemployment rates have the strongest effect on gubernatorial popularity among Republicans evaluating Democrats; they have no statistically significant effect among Democrats evaluating Democrats. Among Democrats evaluating Republicans, the effect is statistically significant but substantively moderate.

In contrast to the substantively weak individual-level effects in the previous section, though, these aggregate effects are generally strong. A one-point rise in the state unemployment rate is associated with a large fall in gubernatorial approval—between six and twelve points, depending on partisan factors. Moreover, state unemployment rates explain much of the variance in gubernatorial approval levels; including it renders the two control variables almost meaningless. Although state unemployment has a weak substantive effect on individual decisions about the governor, then, the aggregate effect is dramatic.

These findings use averaged data from January through March 2006. This decision was arbitrary, but not particularly consequential; when using data from earlier periods, the results are essentially the same.[17] When using data from later periods,

[17] The SurveyUSA data go back to May 2005. Although the estimated effect of unemployment on approval remains similar when using data from these earlier months, the significance levels occasionally change. In

however, the results deviate somewhat from those shown above. As an example, consider Table 11, which uses averaged data from September and October 2006.[18] Although the results among Democratic respondents change little, the estimated effect of unemployment changes among Republican respondents. First, unemployment loses its statistical significance among Republican respondents evaluating Democratic governors. As it turns out, though, this change is entirely the result of a single influential outlier, West Virginia. Removing West Virginia from the analysis causes the estimated effect of unemployment to rise to -10.39 (p=0.026), bringing the estimate back in line with expectations.[19]

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particular, the estimated effect among Democrats evaluating Democratic governors is statistically significant in some earlier months, although the magnitude of the estimated effect is consistent.

[18] In addition to the changed time frame, these new estimates also differ from Table 10 in that they include New Jersey and Virginia, whose governors had served long enough by this time to make their approval ratings meaningful. These two states are not influential on the results, though.

[19] During this period, West Virginia's Democratic governor, Joe Manchin, enjoyed immense crossover appeal among Republicans; of those with an opinion, 74.2% of Republicans approved of him. No other Democratic governor had such high cross-party approval. Among the other twenty Democratic governors used in Table 11, approval among Republicans ranged from 15.9 to 72.8%, with an average of 43.1%. West Virginia is not a large outlier in this equation—its standardized residual is only 2.11—but Manchin's extremely high popularity gives this residual sufficient leverage to distort the regression results, justifying West Virginia's exclusion. Removing West Virginia causes R-squared to rise to 0.44 (0.34 adjusted).

Table 11: Gubernatorial Responsibility for the Economy in Late 2006

	Republican governor		Democratic governor	
Respondent party	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
State unemployment	-8.32***	-6.21*	-7.05	-3.26
	(2.26)	(2.46)	(4.52)	(2.50)
Bush approval level	-0.30	0.46	0.40	0.77†
	(0.44)	(0.66)	(0.65)	(0.39)
Logged electoral votes	-2.45	-7.24†	-9.93	-1.30
	(3.38)	(3.59)	(6.30)	(3.63)
Constant	99.60**	48.91***	33.78	64.63***
	(36.18)	(12.63)	(51.66)	(10.57)
N	28	28	21	21
R^2 (adjusted)	0.39 (0.31)	0.37 (0.29)	0.34 (0.23)	0.34 (0.23)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the aggregate approval level among the specified group of respondents. All variables are averages covering September through October 2006.
†p≤0.10, *p≤0.05, **p≤0.01, ***p≤0.001.

Second, unemployment becomes a stronger factor among Republicans evaluating Republican governors. This inconsistency is more puzzling. Although the estimated effect of unemployment among other partisan groups has been consistent across the past three sets of regressions, particularly after the West Virginia correction, the estimated effect among Republicans evaluating Republican governors has been inconsistent. The estimated effect was very strong in Table 9, moderate in Table 10, and somewhere between these extremes in Table 11. It is unclear what causes this inconsistency. Estimating the effects on unemployment quadratically does not change this general pattern, nor do outliers cause these problems. One conclusion about this group does seem clear, though: Although 72.6% of respondents in this group claimed in 1982 that neither the governor nor the president was responsible for the economy (see Table 2), similar

respondents in 2006 do hold their governor accountable for economic conditions within their state.

Discussion: The Importance of Partisan Subgroups

The preceding analyses lead to two major conclusions. First, when respondents evaluate their state economy relative to the nation's, partisan factors create strong biases; respondents give better evaluations to the economic level that corresponds to the governmental level controlled by their party. Second, when respondents evaluate their individual governors, partisan factors determine how strongly the state's economic performance will influence the result.[20]

Federalism plays an important role in American voting behavior. However, this analysis demonstrates that federalism's role differs somewhat from what researchers have previously thought. Recent research has presented evidence that voters hold state-level and federal officials accountable for different sets of issues; in this line of thinking, voters recognize that state and federal officials have differing policy responsibilities and judge them accordingly. This argument presupposes that the lines dividing federal from state authority are clear. Although state and federal powers were more neatly divided at America's founding, the divisions have blurred substantially over America's history,

[20] Some readers will wonder whether these results depend on my use of unemployment as a macroeconomic indicator. Previous research has shown that each party "owns" certain issues; of particular importance, Democrats own the issue of unemployment (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kelley and Mirer 1974; Petrocik 1992). Unfortunately, fewer indicators are available for the states than for the nation, making it difficult to test the dependence of my findings on my choice of indicator. Nevertheless, the nature of my findings suggests that more than issue ownership is at work. Issue ownership would lead us to expect Democratic governors (not Republican governors) to be held accountable for unemployment; we might also expect Democratic respondents to care more than Republican respondents about unemployment. Together, these expectations would lead us to predict patterns very different from those proposed in Table 8.

especially in the realm of economic policy. When recession looms, voters are as likely to look to Washington as to their state capitals for relief.

My findings do not refute the functional responsibility argument; they merely show that functional responsibility has less applicability when functions overlap. In issue areas where responsibility is uncertain, such as economic policy, voters instead rely on partisan shortcuts when assigning responsibility for policy outcomes. Functional responsibility interacts with presidential, gubernatorial, and respondent partisanship to determine which issues influence gubernatorial popularity. When it suits their partisan predispositions, voters blame their governor for state-level problems; when it does not, they do not. In addition to influencing which issues affect gubernatorial popularity, this partisan logic also affects voter judgments of policy outcomes. Partisan biases have clear, substantial effects on respondent evaluations of the state's economic health.

Besides the specific conclusions discussed already, this analysis also has a broader implication: When analyzing gubernatorial popularity and elections, researchers must take care to look for partisan interactions. Sometimes, partisan subgroups may display patterns unobservable in aggregate data. Perhaps this reason explains why previous research has had such inconsistent results about the effects of state unemployment rates on gubernatorial approval. Unfortunately, gubernatorial approval ratings are gathered far less frequently than we as analysts might like; even when they are gathered, data are not always available by subgroup. But when it is available, researchers would be well advised to consider subgroups separately rather than assuming that aggregate approval ratings will contain all patterns of interest.

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