

Economic Crisis and Vote Choice in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Elections (DRAFT)

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Abstract

Over the course of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign the U.S. economy continued to deteriorate in one of the country's most serious recessions in history. This economic crisis provides an ideal context for exploring how economic attitudes are shaped. Our interest is in understanding how, and whether, the dynamics of the election campaign and the media coverage of economic-related events, affect these economic attitudes. And we are particularly interested in whether these attitudes exhibit exceptional levels of optimism or pessimism for particular partisan subgroups in the electorate. We accept the notion that economic attitudes at the individual level will in fact be measured with error, some of it systematically related to partisanship, for example. The more interesting question though is how context, in particular the actual economic and media context, affects this systematic error in the measurement of economic attitudes.

1 Introduction

Over the course of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign the U.S. economy continued to deteriorate in one of the country's most serious recessions in history. This economic crisis provides an ideal context for exploring how economic attitudes are shaped. Our interest is in understanding how, and whether, the dynamics of the election campaign and the media coverage of economic-related events, affect these economic attitudes. And we are particularly interested in whether these attitudes exhibit exceptional levels of optimism or pessimism for particular partisan subgroups in the electorate.

It has become widely accepted that these economic attitudes will in fact be strongly influenced by partisanship cues as opposed to fluctuations in the real economy. Kramer's classic 1983 essay is an important foundation for this notion. He argued that individual-level measures of subjective economic evaluations suffer from serious measurement error. He suggested that variations in economic evaluations were essentially variations in responses to a question regarding perceptions of a constant (the national economic outcome which does not vary in a cross-sectional survey). Any error in individual perceptions of this constant would likely, he argued, be influenced by vote preference. Kramer's conclusion was that this would inflate estimates of the magnitude of the economic vote. And there is a body of empirical literature documenting the factors that likely influence the "error" in individual evaluations. Partisanship, as Kramer points out, is one of the most important factors but other factors also can influence this measurement error such as attention to the media or information levels Duch and Anderson (2000); Wlezien and Twiggs (1997); Hetherington (1996); Bartels (1996).

We accept the notion that economic attitudes at the individual level will in fact be measured with error, some of it systematically related to partisanship, for example. The more interesting question though is how context, in particular the actual economic and media context, affects this systematic error in the measurement of economic attitudes. This notion that the campaign context can shape how economic attitudes evolve and

how they enter the vote utility function has recently been highlighted by Vavreck (2009). And (Duch and Stevenson, 2009) have provided cross-national evidence on how the media context shapes economic attitudes in twelve European contexts.

In this essay we report preliminary insights to this issue gleaned from, again, a preliminary analysis of the U.S. CCAP panel data. The 2008 CCAP, directed by Simon Jackman and Lynn Vavreck, adopted a panel design such that impaneled respondents were interviewed on six different waves over the course of a year, beginning in November, 2007 and ending with a post-election wave in December 2008. The panel design of this study is particularly powerful for addressing this question of the dynamics of economic attitudes over the course of an electoral campaign. As Bartels (2006), and many others, points out, in the context of an election campaign measures of attitudes, behaviour or knowledge are derived from survey instruments are subject to measurement error (Kramer, 1983; Achen, 1975). Examples include measures of partisanship, economic evaluations, knowledge of politics, voting turnout, etc. With panel survey data we can estimate models that distinguish between random measurement error (which results in instability in measures of attitudes over time) and changes in the underlying real opinions. Bartels (1993) nicely illustrates how the use of models of measurement error in panel data (Wiley and Wiley, 1970) generates quite different results from estimates that ignore the impact of random measurement error.

The essay is organized as follows: We briefly sketch a model of economic attitudes; then describe the data used for this analysis; we then describe the economic context for the 2008 Presidential campaign; we then describe how economic attitudes evolved over the course of the campaign; and finally conclude with some empirical speculations regarding the role of the media.

2 Some Theory

Kramer (1983) very nicely summarizes the measurement issues associated the economic

vote estimated with individual data: specifically that measures of perceived personal financial circumstances are contaminated with “politically irrelevant” sources of variation – either economic outcomes that are not “government induced” or the types of endogenous factors discussed earlier (partisanship). Strictly speaking aggregate-level fluctuations in the macro-economy represent the “cleanest” measure of such government induced changes in personal financial conditions. Since, in the case of a cross-sectional study, these factors do not vary across individuals, scholars have typically opted for individual-level perceptions of the economy that of course do vary across individuals within a cross-sectional study.

Our contention is that these attitudes about the economy do vary across individuals in a survey and even over the course of the election campaign in a theoretically interesting fashion. Moreover one cannot understand vote choice in the context of a dynamic political campaign without a theory that explains variation in these economic attitudes. With respect to voters, this implies that attitudes about the economy evolve over the course of the campaign. The most important insight necessary in addressing this question is the recognition that the evaluation of the economy is an opinion. Fortunately we have a very rich general literature on public opinion formation that provides the theoretical and empirical foundations for such an undertaking what factors influence these opinions (for example, Zaller (1992) Mutz (1992) Iyengar (1991) Bartels (1996) Lodge and Brau (1995)). Efforts to understand how the media and campaigns shape voter opinions is becoming increasingly prominent in the U.S. political behaviour literature. Zaller’s work is particularly relevant here because of his insistence that elites and the media are the driving force behind change in American public opinion in the United States. For years, the media’s impact on political opinion had been characterized as minimal (see McGuire (1986) for a review) or limited to an agenda setting function (beginning with McCombs and Shaw (1972)). Zaller’s model, however, clearly gives the media a dominant role in shaping public opinion - a view echoed by many other recent voices (Bartels (1996); Hetherington (1996)). Further, new empirical research, which uses new measures of the

key concepts and accounts for individual heterogeneity in the reception and acceptance of media messages, supports the media’s new status as the maker of public opinion (Mutz (1992); Zaller (1992), Zaller (2004); Iyengar (1991)).

Following Duch and Palmer (2002) economic evaluations can be characterized in the following terms,

$$X_{it} = \lambda_{it}X_t^O + X_{it}^S + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

$$X_{it}^S = f(W) \tag{2}$$

where X_t^O is the objective economic economy, X_{it}^S captures systematic differences due to information and subjective factors (i.e., W), and ε is the stochastic component. In this formal definition, individual-level evaluations contain two forms of “noise”: subjective considerations and random fluctuations. For students of economic voting, concerned with estimating an economic vote model, both forms of noise constitute sources of non-attitudes. If we include national economic evaluations in an economic voting model without controlling for this systematic measurement error X_{it}^S , the evaluations will “pick up” the direct effect of factors captured in the W term, such as partisan pre-dispositions, thereby producing a biased estimate of the relationship between economic perceptions and vote choice.

But our primary concern in this essay is understanding how $|X_{it}^S|$ evolves over the course of an electoral campaign. Our contention is simply that in an electoral campaign in which the economy is highly salient, $|X_{it}^S|$ will be relatively large at the outset (reflecting the well known endogeneity bias in economic evaluations) but will decline over the course of the campaign for both partisans and non-partisans. Second, our expectation is that the media treatment of economic events plays an important role in shaping the evolution of economic attitudes over the course of the campaign.

3 The Studies and Data

The Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project brought together over 60 political scientists, 25 institutions to create an study of 2008 presidential campaigns. The resulting dataset is a six-wave panel study of 18,250 respondents with an over-sample in battleground and early primary states. The sample is representative of registered voters and stratified by battleground or non-battleground states. The battleground states are over-sampled such that they are equal in population with the non-battleground. Toward this end, the sample contains oversamples in nine states that makeup both battleground and early primaries (FL, IA, MN, NV, WI, NH, NM, OH, PA). The CCAP conducted a baseline survey in December of 2007. Subsequent panel waves took place in January, March, September, October, and November of 2008. Over thirty thousand respondents were interviewed in December of 2007. Every attempt was be made to retain these respondents throughout all the waves of the panel. Additional cases were added in subsequent waves.

As with all the cooperative studies, a portion of all the interviews conducted after the baseline wave were reserved for unique data collection designed by participating teams. Every group that participated received data on 1000 respondents interviewed in the baseline, the post-election wave, and at least one campaign wave of the survey. The team data are not contained in the Common Content data release.

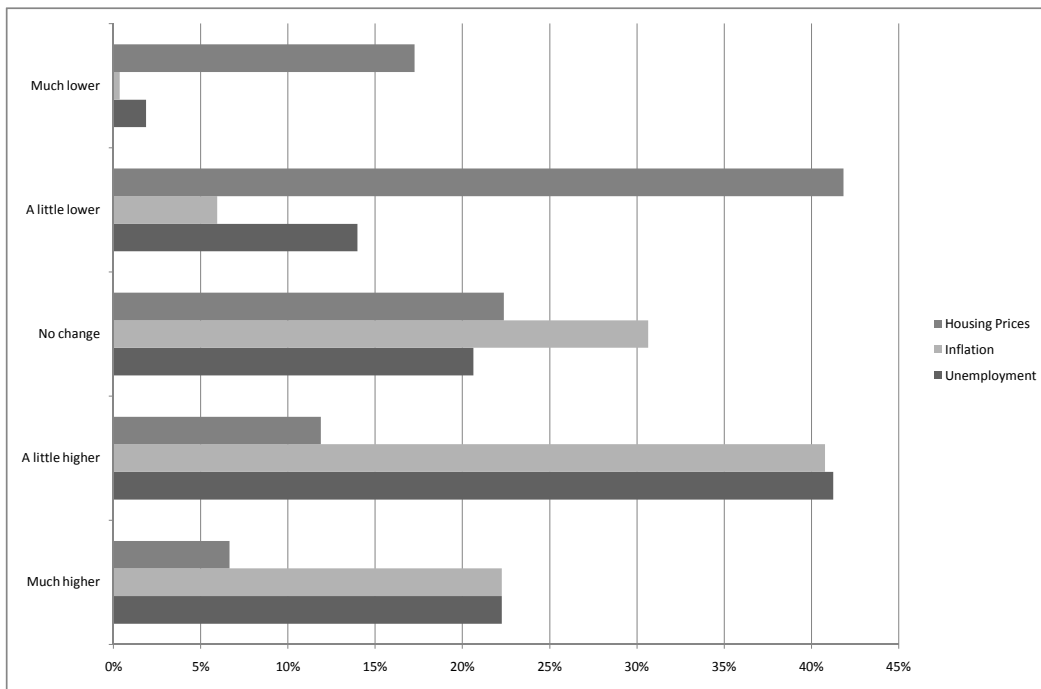
The surveys were conducted online and were approximately 20 minutes long. The baseline survey was shorter (about 15 minutes) and contained only Common Content. The first 10 minutes of subsequent waves were common to all respondents (Common Content approximately 40 questions) and the last 10 minutes were reserved for participating institutions (Team Content approximately 40 questions). The post-election wave was 10 minutes long (split equally between Common and Team Content).

3.1 Economic Attitudes at the Outset of the Campaign Period

Our point of departure is the beginning of the Presidential electoral campaign. In January, 2008 we conducted interviews with 1000 empaneled respondents in order to obtain a baseline of their economic attitudes early in the campaign period. Two simultaneous events likely shaped economic attitudes over the next 12 months: 1) the electoral campaign moves into full gear; 2) and the economic crisis accelerates.

The baseline snapshot of the economic attitudes of the electorate resembles the typical profile of economic evaluations found in voter preference studies. First, as is the case in most surveys of economic attitudes, Figure 1 indicates that the public clearly recognized the severity of the economic situation that was described earlier. We focus on three dimensions of the macro-economy that were of particular concern during this 12 month period: unemployment, inflation and housing prices. Respondents were asked to provide their assessment of the prospects over the next 12 months for unemployment and inflation in the country and for the price of housing in their neighborhood. In the case of all three indicators over 60 percent of the respondents in January, 2008 expected these three measures to get worse.

Figure 1: Economic Attitudes at Outset of Presidential Campaign, January 2008



A second important point is that any snapshot of these economic attitudes will incorporate measurement error and, as we pointed out earlier, some of this measurement error reflects the influence of partisanship. This has been extensively documented in both the U.S. case (Duch and Anderson, 2000; Wlezien and Twigg, 1997; Erikson, 2004) and in comparative studies (Duch and Armstrong, 2009). And as we argued at the outset, the magnitude of $|X_{it}^S|$ will respond to both campaign messages and to the representation of economic events in the media. Table 3 presents our early snapshot of economic evaluations broken down by party identification. The pattern is precisely what we would expect. The relationship between partisanship and economic evaluations is particularly evident in the case of respondents' prospective assessments of unemployment: 36 percent of those strongly identifying themselves as Democrats think there will be much more unemployment in the next 12 months which compares to the much lower 9 percent of strongly identifying Republicans who share this attitude. And we see exactly the opposite pattern for the no change responses: 13 percent of strong Democrats expect no change while 36 percent of strong Republicans share this view. We see similar, although slightly more muted, patterns in the respondents' prospective attitudes toward inflation and housing prices.

Table 1: Prospective Economic Attitudes: January, 2008

	Strong Democrat	Moderate Democrat	Leaning Democrat	Independent	Leaning Republican	Moderate Republican	Strong Republican
Unemployment							
Much more	36.2	23.3	39.3	36.0	12.2	8.9	9.4
A little more	36.9	47.6	40.5	40.5	43.2	38.9	35.9
No change	12.8	17.5	14.3	11.2	28.4	22.2	35.9
A little less	9.9	10.7	4.8	10.11	16.22	28.9	17.0
Much less	4.3	0.9	1.2	2.3	0.0	1.1	1.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	141	103	84	89	74	90	159
Inflation							
Much higher	35.5	24.5	32.9	30.0	12.2	13.3	9.5
Slightly higher	39.0	48.0	36.5	38.5	44.6	45.6	36.7
Same	21.9	20.6	27.1	27.5	39.2	33.3	41.8
Slightly lower	4.3	6.9	3.5	4.4	4.1	7.8	10.8
Much lower	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	141	102	85	91	74	90	158
Housing prices							
Much higher	9.9	5.9	7.1	11.0	4.1	6.6	2.5
Slightly higher	7.1	15.7	5.9	20.9	8.2	11.0	13.9
Same	14.9	22.6	12.9	20.9	17.8	30.8	30.4
Slightly lower	41.8	38.2	45.9	30.0	53.4	44.0	44.9
Much lower	26.2	17.7	28.2	17.6	16.4	7.7	8.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	141	102	85	91	73	91	158

3.2 The Role of the Economy in the 2008 Campaign

These then are the economic attitudes at the outset of the 2008 Presidential campaign. And they in fact accurately reflect the dramatic deterioration in the economy that began to occur just prior to the 2008 period of the Presidential campaign. As Figure 2 suggests, voters in fact did experience an unexpected shock to the macro-economy and one that was quite distinct from recent history. The initial negative shock to the U.S. economy occurred in June, 2007. This is the first major pre-campaign negative turning point for many of the macro-economic indicators. Real disposable income declined by .6 percent in the second quarter of 2007. In June of 2007 we see the first indication of a housing price crisis when the CSXR index (the Case-Shiller composite index of housing prices in the top 10 MSA's in the U.S.) begins its unprecedented decline (the series begins in 1986). And, as Figure 3 indicates – not entirely surprisingly – the Michigan Consumer Confidence Index begins its rapid decline in June, 2007. The consumer confidence indicator is clear evidence that voters were girding themselves for a significant economic downturn. In early 2007 we also begin to see evidence that the economy would likely play an important role in the Presidential campaign: the percentage of respondents to the Gallup survey question, regarding the most important problem indicating economic problems, begins to start its significant rise in February, 2008.

Figure 2: The U.S. Economic Crisis during 2008 Presidential Campaign

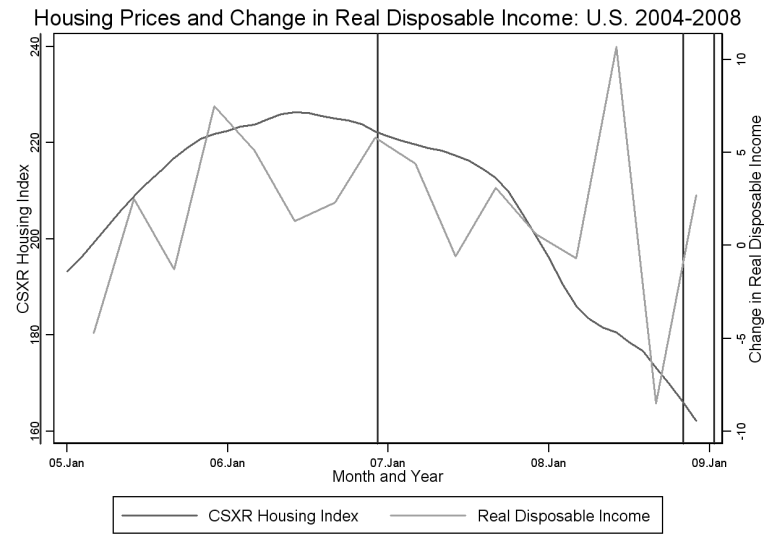
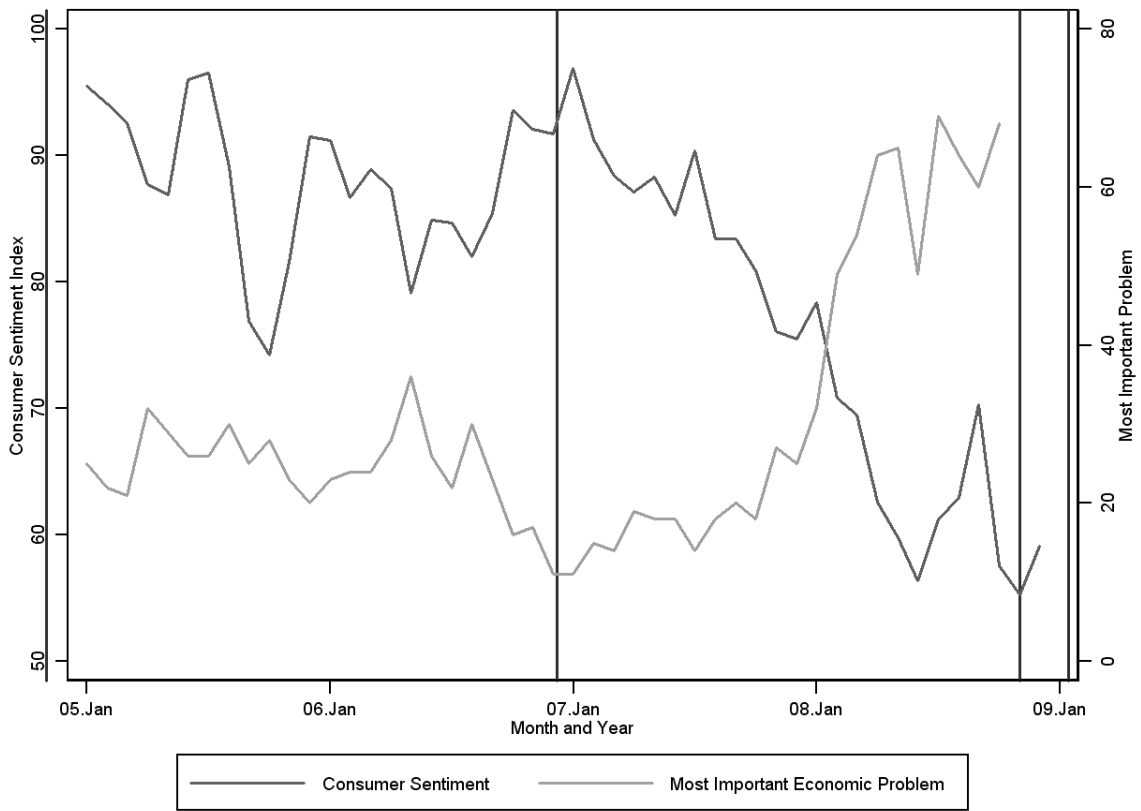


Figure 3: Consumer Index and Most Important Economic Problem: U.S. 2005-2008

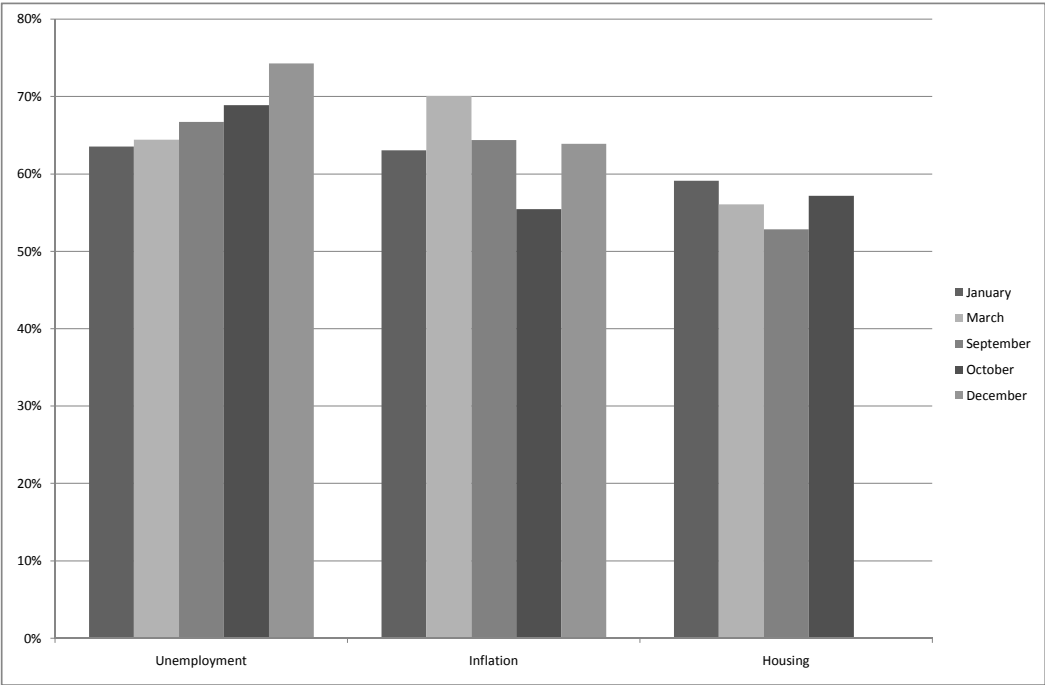


Lets briefly return to Figure 2 because the left panel identifies an interesting development that occurs over the course of the campaign. Note that relatively early in 2008 the global economy was experiencing severe price shocks, ostensibly linked to growing demand for energy and commodities in developing nations such as China and dwindling reserves. But as the global economy literally collapsed after the summer of 2008 the prices of commodities and energy followed suit. This dramatic decline in prices is evident in the inflation series in Figure 2 – the series peaks in the early part of 2008 and then declines for the rest of the year. On the other hand the unemployment rate continues a rather steep increase throughout the 2008 period, reaching levels not seen for decades.

3.3 Economic Attitudes over the Course of the Electoral Campaign

As Figure 4 suggests, the respondents in our panel survey had economic attitudes that were perfectly consistent with the trends and inflection points identified in Figure 2; in general they were very negative and consistently so throughout the campaign. And while there is no real evidence of any strong trend in any of these economic attitudes, there is some evidence that voters were sensitive to some of the nuances associated with this unfolding economic crisis. First, there is a small increase in negative evaluations of the unemployment situation in the country, accurately reflecting the fact that the employment situation deteriorated significantly over the course of the campaign. Second, evaluations of price trends are at least somewhat consistent with the real economy in that there is no evidence of rising concern with prices over the course of the campaign and possibly a small drop in concern although this seems to be negated by the upward blip in October.

Figure 4: Trend in Economic Attitudes over Presidential Campaign, January-December 2008



The apparent stability of economic attitudes in Figure 4 is a bit misleading. In fact, over the course of the campaign, individuals shift their economic assessments even in the 2008 context of a particularly gruesome economy. Table 2 compares the economic attitudes of respondents in January of 2008 with those in October, 2008. First note, as we would expect, a large majority of respondents had pessimistic (a lot worse + a little worse) attitudes and were quite stable over the course of the campaign. We see that 79 percent of the respondents who had negative attitudes regarding unemployment in January maintained this negative attitude in October. In the case of inflation and housing, it is about two-thirds of those with negative attitudes who remain negative in October. Nevertheless, there is some movement – one-third of the initially negative on inflation and housing shift their assessments between January and October. And very large percentages of those who were positive at the outset of the campaign shift in a negative direction as the campaign unfolds. The principal goal of this essay is to gain some insight into why these attitudes shift: Who has unstable economic attitudes and what aspects of the campaign or media coverage help us understand such movement?

Table 2: Stability of Prospective Economic Attitudes: January 2008 to October 2008

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
October		<i>January</i>	
Unemployment			
Positive	38.9	20.6	13.8
Neutral	18.5	28.8	7.3
Negative	42.6	50.7	78.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Observations	54	73	246
Inflation			
Positive	23.1	17.0	13.3
Neutral	46.2	46.2	18.7
Negative	30.8	36.8	68.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Observations	26	106	241
Housing prices			
Positive	39.2	20.3	10.0
Neutral	36.5	44.1	27.3
Negative	24.3	35.7	62.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Observations	74	143	150

Depending on the dynamics of the electoral campaign, over the course of the campaign, economic attitudes can vary in a systematic fashion or could remain quite static (Vavreck, 2009). In a campaign, such as the 2008 Presidential campaign, in which the economy gains significant attention from both the candidates and the media, our expectation is that economic attitudes will move in the direction of the real economy. Hence our expectation for these 2008 data is that the magnitude of $|X_{it}^S|$ will decline. This is borne out by Table 2: In the case of each of the three economic attitudes the stable positive cell (upper left) is consistently much smaller than the stable negative cell (lower right) – in fact, on average by a magnitude of 2-1. And note the very small percentages go from a negative evaluation in January to a positive attitude in October.

Whose economic attitudes change over the course of the campaign? Clearly there will be little room for change in the economic attitudes of Democratic partisans – as Table 3 suggests their attitudes were soundly negative at the start of the campaign. The interesting question is how the economic attitudes of Republican partisans and Independents change over the course of the campaign. Zaller (2004) provides one highly plausible model here. He argues that the magnitude of $|X_{it}^S|$ will decline most markedly for the politically least sophisticated – it is this group of the electorate that will be most receptive to heightened levels of information about the state of the economy. And these individuals will generally be less politically engaged and less partisan. Strong partisans, who are the more political sophisticated, will be very attentive to these messages regarding the state of the economy but will be most resistant to messages that are inconsistent with their partisanship. Hence Republicans, in this case, will resist messages that reflect poorly on the incumbent party of the President. Zaller’s model potentially helps us understand the source of endogeneity bias in economic evaluations, i.e., strong partisans tend to have inflated $|X_{it}^S|$ terms.

The baseline economic attitudes that we presented in Table 2 certainly seem consistent with the Zaller argument. The most Republican respondents were most optimistic about the economy and the Democratic respondents were the most pessimistic. Hence most

cross-sectional surveys of the electorate are likely to lend support to Zaller’s argument. Moreover in an election campaign in which the economy plays a relatively subdued role, we suspect that this pattern might persist over the course of the campaign. A much stronger test of this argument is an election in which the economy becomes a very salient issue and which the media paints an unambiguously negative picture of the state of the economy.¹ What happens to the economic attitudes of the politic sophisticates as the campaign unfolds and as the media message becomes increasingly negative?

In order to gain some insight into this question, we have categorized, for each of the three economic attitudes, the panel respondents into five groups: Stable Optimists (those who are optimistic in both the January and October waves); Stable Neutral (those who have neutral responses in both waves); Stable Pessimists (pessimistic in both waves); Change Pessimists (those who move from optimistic in January to pessimistic in October); and Change Optimists (those who move from pessimistic in January to optimistic in October). The distribution of these types broken down by partisanship is presented in Table 3.

The economic attitudes of partisan respondents, over the course of an electoral campaign in which the economy is highly salient, appear to become increasingly consistent with actual economic outcomes. In the case of prospective evaluations of unemployment, about 50 percent of leaning Republicans remain stable pessimists and another 18 percent become more pessimistic. As we saw earlier the moderate-to-strong Republicans had relatively optimistic attitudes at the outset of the 2008 campaigns but about 30 percent of strong to moderate Republicans in October had shifted their attitudes in a more pessimistic direction.

Interpreting the inflation results is more complex, reflecting the fact that inflation trends shift in mid-course of the election campaign. In fact, by the end of the year experts were divided on inflation expectations with one camp forecasting declining inflation as a

¹In principle this might also hold for an election campaign in which economic performance increasingly gets better and the media presents a positive spin on it. Duch and Stevenson (2009), though, suggests there are considerably asymmetries in media presentation of economic outcomes such that positive outcomes are typically under-reported

consequence of the collapse of global economic activity; while another camp fretted about the inflation consequences of the governments' responses to the deep economic recession. Given this context, the results for the strong-moderate partisans of both parties are remarkably similar. About 56 percent of the Democrat partisans are stable pessimists and an additional 10 percent represent respondents who became more pessimistic over the course of the campaign. Republican strong-moderate partisans do not look dramatically different on the pessimism front with 29 percent being stable pessimists and another 22 percent shifting to the pessimist camp. We also see a similar percentage of both Democrat and Republican moderate to strong partisans shifting to a more optimistic view of inflation by the end of the campaign (31 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of Democrats).

The pattern for changes in attitudes regarding housing prices is quite similar to the inflation result in the sense that Republican and Democratic partisans become quite similar by the end of the campaign in spite of divergences at the outset. Again we see this quite large number of both partisans become more optimistic about housing by the end of the campaign. Unlike the case with inflation there does not appear to be much strong economic grounds for optimism here (although the measures adopted by the Federal Reserve in November, 2008 might be an explanation).

Table 3: Prospective Economic Attitudes: January, 2008

	Strong/Moderate Democrat	Leaning Democrat	Inde- pendent	Leaning Republican	Strong/Moderate Republican
Unemployment					
Stable Optimist	1.8	2.6	6.7	5.1	9.2
Stable Neutral	2.7	5.26	6.7	10.3	8.3
Stable Pessimist	59.8	73.7	66.7	48.7	35.0
Change Pessimist	12.5	7.9	6.7	18.0	30.8
Change Optimist	23.21	10.5	13.3	18.0	16.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	112	33	30	39	120
Inflation					
Stable Optimist	0.9	0.0	0.0	5.1	2.5
Stable Neutral	6.3	20.5	6.7	25.6	16.5
Stable Pessimist	55.9	41.0	60.0	38.5	28.9
Change Pessimist	9.9	20.5	20.0	10.3	21.5
Change Optimist	27.0	18.0	13.3	20.5	30.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	111	39	30	39	121
Housing prices					
Stable Optimist	7.6	2.6	6.9	0.0	11.6
Stable Neutral	13.2	12.8	6.9	34.2	18.2
Stable Pessimist	32.1	43.6	37.9	21.1	14.9
Change Pessimist	22.6	25.6	34.5	15.8	30.6
Change Optimist	24.5	15.4	13.8	29.0	24.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	106	39	29	38	121

4 The Role of Candidate and Media Cues

Another important goal of this project is to understand the contribution of the media and campaign messages to these shifts in economic attitudes over the course of the electoral campaign. These efforts are still quite preliminary. Nevertheless, we can provide two preliminary insights.

First, our initial intuition is that the media can contribute towards reducing $|X_{it}^S|$ although again it depends on the campaign context – one could also identify campaign contexts in which the media effect is exactly the opposite, i.e., it increases $|X_{it}^S|$. But for the reasons spelt out earlier we expect that the media would reduce $|X_{it}^S|$ over the course of the campaign. An initial exploration of this effect has generated weakly supportive evidence. The analysis consists of first creating a measure of media attention – it consists of the factor scores from a factor analysis of three media attention items: whether the respondent reads about politics regularly on the internet; whether she reads the news on the internet; and whether she watches political talk shows on television. Our interest is whether this exposure to the media helps understand whether a respondent falls into one of our five groups: Stable Optimists; Stable Neutral; Stable Pessimists; Change Pessimists; and Change Optimists. Our hypothesis here is that exposure to the media should favour a more pessimistic economic attitude over optimism.

The results of the multinomial logit regression of economic attitude stability group on media exposure are reported in Table 4. Column 1 reports the bi-variate regression results which tend to confirm our initial hypothesis. High scores on the media attention variable indicate lower media exposure. Hence those who are less likely to be exposed to media are more likely to be Stable Optimist relative to the referent category which is Stable Pessimists. Similarly, and again with reference to the Stable Pessimists, those with less exposure to the media are more likely to be Stable Neutral or Change Optimists. Hence exposure to the media tends to promote stability of pessimistic economic attitudes. When we add controls to the equation, essentially the only relationship that becomes remotely

credible here is that those who are less likely to be exposed to media are more likely to be Stable Optimist relative to the referent category which is Stable Pessimists. We treat these results as being weakly supportive of our hypothesis that exposure to the media in the 2008 electoral campaign tended to promote pessimistic economic attitudes.

Table 4: Multinomial Logit Regression of Economic Attitude Stability on Media Exposure

	Equation 1	Equation 2
Stable Optimist		
Media Attention	0.77(0.33)	0.65(0.42)
Interest in Political Events		0.64(0.46)
Education		0.11(0.19)
Money in Stocks		-0.04(0.02)
Party ID		0.46(0.14)
Intercept	-2.15(0.25)	72.14(40.00)
Stable Neutral		
Media Attention	0.72(0.32)	0.36(0.39)
Interest in Political Events		0.43(0.43)
Education		-0.56(0.19)
Money in Stocks		0.00(0.02)
Party ID		0.35(0.12)
Intercept	-2.05(0.23)	-7.5(34.51)
Change Pessimist		
Media Attention	0.07(0.23)	-0.02(0.27)
Interest in Political Events		0.23(0.32)
Education		-0.16(0.11)
Money in Stocks		-0.01(0.01)
Party ID		0.31(0.07)
Intercept	-1.00(0.16)	8.97(22.08)
Change Optimist		
Media Attention	0.46(0.21)	0.24(0.26)
Interest in Political Events		0.39(0.29)
Education		-0.14(0.11)
Money in Stocks		-0.01(0.01)
Party ID		0.08(0.07)
Intercept	-0.95(0.15)	12.7(21.94)
N	345	

As the earlier results presented in this essay indicate, over the course of an election campaign partisans change their economic attitudes and in fact in this particular campaign the economic attitudes of partisans seem to become more in line with the real economy. Two important sources of information about the economy are the media and partisan cues from the candidates themselves. As part of the CCAP survey we included an experiment designed in particular to explore the extent to which the respondents' economic attitudes could be primed by either the media or candidates. The experiment involved two manipulations. One of the manipulations concerned the source of the economic news. Respondents were randomly assigned to three different "economic news source" treatments: a generic news report; Candidate Obama; and Candidate McCain. The second manipulation concerned the type of economic information provided by these three sources. Respondents were randomly assigned to an information condition in which unemployment is predicted to rise; one in which unemployment is predicted to be stable; and a third in which unemployment is predicted to be declining. Hence, respondents were randomly assigned to one of these nine treatment conditions. Having been primed by one of these nine treatments respondents were then asked to predict the level of unemployment in 12 months.

Our primary interest here is to understand how partisans respond to these different information conditions. Our expectation is that the three information cues will affect Democrat partisans, Independents and Republican partisans in a similar fashion: Their estimate of the level of unemployment the following year will reflect the directional prediction in the news story (higher, stable or lower). In the case of the cues from the two candidates our expectations are that the economic attitudes of partisans of each candidate will reflect their candidates' directional cues and that partisans will be unaffected by the direction cues of the other party's candidates.

Preliminary results from the analysis of this CCAP experiment, for each of the three types of partisans, are presented in Table 5. And for the most part, these preliminary results support our hypotheses. First, note that all three partisan types respond to the

"neutral" news manipulation in a similar fashion: their average predictions of the unemployment in the following year reflects the direction cues they received from the news story manipulation. Second, results for the Democratic partisans are reasonably supportive. For Democratic partisans who received an Obama manipulation, the difference between the average decline treatment and the average increase treatment is 1.7 points while it is less than half this (0.7) for those Democratic partisans who received the McCain manipulation. The Republican partisans behave similarly: for those who receive the McCain manipulation there is a 1.5 percent difference between the increase and decline manipulations; while the difference is only 0.3 for those who receive the Obama manipulation. Finally, the Obama/McCain manipulation results for the Independents are interesting worth further investigation. Independents seem to have responded quite significantly to the McCain directional cues but were not moved much by Obama.

While our results from the experimental manipulations are still preliminary they do seem to confirm our initial hypotheses. The economic attitudes of voters seem to be quite responsive to "neutral" media messages about the economy. On the other hand the economic attitudes of partisan respond to economic informational cues from their party's candidates but are resistant to those from the opposing party. This might suggest that some of the movement in the economic attitudes of Republican partisans over the course of the campaign may have result from their candidate's frank criticism of the Bush administration's handling of the economy.

Table 5: Economic Cues and Candidates Experiment, CCAP 2008

	News	McCain	Obama
Democrats			
Increase	7.0	7.3	7.3
Same	6.6	7.0	6.0
Decline	5.8	6.6	5.6
N	405	379	400
Independents			
Increase	8.6	7.2	6.6
Same	7.3	6.8	6.0
Decline	5.7	5.8	6.0
N	405	379	400
Republicans			
Increase	6.6	6.9	5.9
Same	6.4	6.1	6.0
Decline	5.4	5.4	5.6
N	405	379	400

5 Conclusion

In this essay we set out to explore, in a very preliminary fashion, how, and whether, the dynamics of the election campaign and the media coverage of economic-related events, affect economic attitudes. And we were particularly interested in whether these attitudes exhibit exceptional levels of optimism or pessimism for particular partisan subgroups in the electorate. The initial results suggest first that at the outset of the Presidential campaign attitudes regarding the economy accurately reflected the negative economic situation. But these attitudes also reflected the partisan preferences of respondents such that Republican identifiers exhibited relatively higher levels of optimism and Democratic identifiers exhibited comparatively high levels of pessimism. Over the course of the campaign, and as the economy deteriorated, these economic attitudes also changed. In the case of the most unambiguous macro-economic indicator, unemployment, the change was primarily on the part of partisan Republicans becoming more pessimistic about the economy. Our conclusion is that the endogeneity in economic attitudes that is often reported is very much conditioned by the economic context in which a political campaign takes place. And in fact there are economic contexts that significantly minimize the extent of this endogeneity.

Our intuition is that the media representation of economic events plays an important role in shaping how these economic attitudes evolve over the course of the campaign. The initial empirical evidence presented here suggests that it is those who are least attentive to the media who have economic attitudes that least reflect the real economy. Our experimental results suggest that even strong partisans of the incumbent party responded to directional economic cues from "neutral" media sources. And this is quite consistent with the evolution of Republican partisans' economic attitudes over the course of the campaign. The media, of course, was without exception presenting a negative perspective on the economy and this is likely to have shifted the economic attitudes of even partisans of the incumbent administration. We also find that the economic attitudes

of partisans respond to the economic direction cues of their party's candidate and are relatively unaffected by cues from the other party's candidate.

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