

Partisan priming and subjective evaluations of the economy: evidence from a survey experiment

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Abstract:

Issues and controversies connected to problems of endogeneity plague many topics of interest in political science, perhaps none more so than in the field of economic voting where in recent years a lively debate has developed over the potential endogeneity of subjective economic evaluations to partisan preferences. Although a great deal of attention has focussed on dealing with these problems at the analysis stage rather less attention has been paid to dealing with the problem at source – that is at the measurement stage. In this study we use a question order experiment to assess whether partisan priming influences subjective evaluations of the economy. If it does then endogeneity bias might be reduced by making questions easier for people to comprehend and answer and by taking steps to minimize the need for information shortcuts.

1 Introduction

Issues and controversies connected to problems of endogeneity plague many topics of interest in political science, perhaps none more so than in the field of economic voting where in recent years a lively debate has developed over the potential endogeneity of subjective economic evaluations to partisan preferences (see, for example Pickup and Evans 2013 and Lewis-Beck et al 2013). Although a great deal of attention has been paid to dealing with and addressing these problems at the analysis stage rather less attention has been paid to dealing with the problem at source – that is at the measurement stage. This is potentially a matter of great import. Given that the standard survey items on subjective evaluations of the economy are so widely used, if there are problems with the measurement of these items then many of the theoretical and empirical insights that have been garnered from this extensive body of research on economic voting may be built on somewhat shaky foundations.

In this study we use a question order experiment to assess whether attitudes towards the economy are influenced by their placement in relation to government evaluations. When question ordering affects the meaning of response options or the weighting of factors relevant to answering an item, the effects can reveal the fact that choices—in “real world” settings no less than in surveys—are often inextricably bound up with the contexts within which the choices are made (Krosnik and Presser, 2010). If substantial question order effects are observed then this indicates that responses to these questions are very context specific. So, for example, if responses to a question on the economy vary by whether they are preceded by a question on government support, this indicates that economic attitudes are inextricably tied to political evaluations. E.g. are endogenous to partisanship.

Previous research on this topic has produced mixed results. A number of studies focusing specifically on economic voting suggests that the positioning of questions on political attitudes immediately prior to economic evaluation questions can influence respondents’ assessments of the national economy and their personal financial situation (Sears and Lau 1983; Lau et al. 1990, Wilcox and Wlezien 1993, Palmer and Duch 2001). However, some of these findings have been contested (see Lewis Beck 1985). Moreover, out of those few survey experiments that have been carried out the results have not always been consistent and the samples have not always been representative of the broader population, which may in turn raise questions about how far the results can be generalised.

Notable examples of this work include Palmer and Duch (2001), who carried out question order experiments on retrospective and prospective national and household economic evaluations in Hungary in relation to the placement of vote intention and strength of party attachment. Somewhat against their expectation they find significant order effects only on retrospective household evaluations, though the extent to which these results can be generalised to other countries in other political contexts is open to question. Wilcox and Wlezien (1993) carried out experiments on students samples in the US, which once again may have problems of external validity. The only nationally representative survey experiment carried out in an advanced democracy to our knowledge is Sturgis et al's (2009) study in Britain, which carried out question order experiments on retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy in relation to the placement of vote recall. However, although the question order effects were in the expected direction they did not reach conventional levels of significance.

Existing research thus provides somewhat suggestive evidence that standard survey items on the economy can be subject to significant partisan bias. Given the inconsistency of these results it is therefore important to replicate. Moreover the potential sources of this bias are not well understood. Broadly speaking the literature on partisanship suggests two main ways in which partisan differences may influence responses to economic questions. First, partisanship may act as a 'perceptual screen' (Converse et al 1960). Accordingly supporters of the incumbent political party may report economic assessments that are more favourable than their actual economic perceptions – and engage in a type of partisan cheerleading (Gerber and Huber 2009). Second, partisanship may act as an 'information shortcut' (Downs 1957). For a variety of reasons, citizens have neither detailed information about government activities nor the necessary motivation and capacity to make use of such information even when it is available (Bartels 1996, Zaller 1992). Accordingly, voters may use partisanship as a shortcut to assess legislation about which they have little or no information (Popkin 1991:19). The distinction between these two sources of bias is important since if partisanship is used as an information shortcut partisan differences may be reduced by making questions simpler and easy to answer.

In order to investigate this possibility we run a series of question order experiments to examine the extent to which political primes affect responses to subjective assessments of the economy. As we set out below, if partisanship acts as an information shortcut, 'satisficing' respondents who find it difficult to answer the question on the economy will use their

attitudes towards the government to inform their response. Under these conditions we would therefore expect to observe significant question order effects. Moreover, if respondents use partisanship as a shortcut to make judgements about general policy areas on which they lack a clear judgement we would expect these placement effects to be stronger on general items (e.g. on the national economy) and weaker on specific items where the respondent possesses first-hand knowledge (e.g. their own household finances).

2 The endogeneity of economic evaluations

Economic voting is perhaps the dominant model of vote choice, with hundreds of articles and books written on the topic all over the world (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007, 2013). Broadly speaking there are two main streams to this research: the first is based on aggregate analysis of the ‘real’ economy; the second is based on survey evaluations of the ‘perceived’ economy. Aggregate studies have consistently found that the vote reacts to a few macroeconomic variables – mainly unemployment and inflation; that voters are myopic, and so have a short time horizon, and that voters react more to negative changes in the economy than to corresponding positive ones (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). A growing body of research has investigated the micro mechanisms that are thought to underpin these relationships using survey data to measure perceptions of the economy (typically: “How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?”).

Recently, a number of studies have argued that these subjective evaluations of the economy are strongly influenced by endogenous partisan considerations and, as such, their effects on government approval and vote are likely to have been overestimated (see Pickup and Evans 2013, for a review). A wide variety of different statistical techniques have been employed to try and untangle these endogeneity issues. Examples of this body of work include panel analyses (Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010); which find that retrospective macro-economic perceptions are strongly conditioned by one-year lagged opinions of the incumbent party; before-and-after election designs (Anderson et al. 2004; Ladner and Wlezien 2007) which demonstrate that economic expectations and retrospective evaluations are conditional on voters’ estimates of election outcomes; and nonrecursive cross-sectional models (Van der Eijk et al. 2007; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997) which find that pre-election vote intention predicts simultaneously measured perceptions of economic

performance. As a consequence, the role of ‘economic appraisals in providing a fulcrum of electoral accountability has been thrown into doubt’ (Anderson 2007).

By contrast, an alternative body of research questions these results. Using repeated cross-sectional survey data from the ANES 1968-2010 Lewis-Beck et al (2013) show that economic perceptions of the mass public are strongly influenced by actual economic conditions, and hardly at all by partisan bias. Indeed, in a series of tests, carried out on different North American and European countries, Lewis-Beck and colleagues consistently find little or no partisan bias in economic perceptions (See Lewis-Beck, 2006; Lewis-Beck and Fraile, 2010; Lewis-Beck et al 2008; Nadeau et al 2013). The reasons for these contradictory findings are not clear. In part they may reflect different estimation strategies, different data sources, or different measures of partisanship that are used by different scholars (Lewis-Beck et al 2013). But the end result is that it is difficult to make a clear judgement on the extent to which economic evaluations are shaped by partisanship, if at all.

3 Information short-cuts and question order effects

Although a great deal of effort has been made to examine these issues of endogeneity at the analysis stage, rather less attention has been devoted to assessing the problem at the measurement stage. According to classic theories of survey methodology there is widespread agreement about the cognitive processes involved in answering questions optimally (Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988). Specifically, respondents are presumed to execute each of four steps. First, they must interpret the question and deduce its intent. Next, they must search their memories for relevant information, and then integrate whatever information comes to mind into a single judgment. Finally, they must translate the judgment into a response, by selecting one of the alternatives offered by the question (Krosnik and Presser 2010). Each of these steps can be quite complex, involving considerable cognitive work (see Tourangeau & Bradburn, 2010). Rather than expend the effort necessary to provide optimal answers, respondents may take subtle or dramatic shortcuts (Krosnik 1991). That is, respondents may interpret each question superficially and select what they believe will appear to be a reasonable answer. In doing so respondents may look to the wording of the question for a cue, pointing to a response that can be easily selected and easily defended if necessary (Krosnik and Presser 2010: 265). Krosnik terms this type of response behaviour *satisficing*. People who are motivated to *satisfice*, as opposed to those who *optimise*, may be particularly sensitive to order effects (Krosnik and Alwin 1987).

Accordingly, when confronted with questions about government policy that are difficult to understand or to answer respondents may use their partisan disposition and attitude towards the government as a shortcut in order to come up with a ‘satisficing’ answer. In this respect the standard survey question on the national economy (How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?) is actually quite a difficult question to answer. Indeed, even trained economists frequently provide different answers to this question. The cognitive processes involved in answering the question optimally are complex: Firstly, the intent of the question is not easy to interpret. When answering the question respondents have to think about how to conceptualise the general economic situation, and may consider, to varying degrees unemployment, inflation, GDP, interest rates, share prices, property prices, and so on. Secondly; they must retrieve the information necessary to make a judgment about how these different aspects of the economy have changed and integrate this information into a single judgement (which is further complicated if the information is inconsistent, which may be a particular problem in times of economic uncertainty). Finally respondents must choose an appropriate response option. Rather than go through all these mental gymnastics, satisficing respondents may instead rely on their partisanship and attitude towards the incumbent government to arrive at what they believe will be a reasonable answer. If so we would expect to observe significant question order effects; whereby responses to the economy vary according to its placement in relation to the political prime.

Although question order effects can take a variety of different forms, they tend to occur among closely related items (Schuman and Presser 1996). Likewise the effects are almost always confined to contiguous items (Smith, 1988). Previous research tends to show that ‘‘general’’ items are more susceptible to influence from ‘‘specific’’ items than vice versa because more general items are more open to diverse interpretation (Krosnik and Presser 2010). Conceptual vagueness can also invite the projection of attitudes other than economic understanding, such as political beliefs (Ansolabehere et al 2013).

Given that question order effects are less likely to occur for specific items, we may anticipate that questions on the economy which are conceptually clear and focussed and easy to understand will be less susceptible to political priming. In particular, questions that are ‘hard to answer’, such as those that are open to diverse interpretation or place cognitive demands on the respondent, may be more prone to priming effects since ‘satisficing’ respondents will look to take shortcuts in order to answer the question.

Research Design

To test these propositions we use a randomized question order experiment in a large scale quota survey carried out in the UK in March 2014 using face to face interviews by Ipsos Mori. We focus on retrospective measures of the economy because these measures are widely used and are thought to be the most important on vote choice (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). Our experimental design consists of two separate experiments using four non-overlapping groups of participants (i.e., respondents did not participate in more than one experiment). Respondents are randomly allocated to one of two experiments and then randomly allocated to one of two conditions. In experiment 1 we examine the endogeneity of general sociotropic economic evaluations, and in experiment 2 we examine the endogeneity of household economic evaluations. Within each experiment respondents are administered the same set of questions on economic perceptions (which vary across experiments) and government approval. In condition 1 the government approval item precedes the economic evaluation item; in condition 2 the order was reversed.¹ Full question wordings are provided in Appendix A.

In order to have confidence that economic evaluations are not susceptible to partisan bias it is important that we have a strong prime. Previous studies have tended to use relatively weak primes to do with party identification or vote intention which does not provide a very strong test of endogeneity. We considered various different primes to do with partisanship, government approval and government support and finally opted for a question which activates *feelings* towards the incumbent Conservative-led government. The exact wording is as follows: How much do you like the current Conservative-led government? Do you like them a lot; like them a bit; neither like or dislike them; dislike them a bit; or dislike them a lot? The advantage of this question is that it taps into a fairly base emotion towards the government and should therefore provoke a somewhat stronger reaction than a more neutral question on satisfaction or approval.

Results

¹ In order to have confidence in the internal validity of our experiment it is important that the questions that precede our experiment are not politically sensitive, and so do not act as an inadvertent prime. The only questions that came before our experiment were the standard module on demographics (excluding income and ethnicity which are asked at the very end of the interview) and a module on the subject of stamp collecting. There is thus little risk that our experiment is contaminated by the questions that come before it.

Table 1 shows responses to the question on the national economy for each of the two experimental conditions. In the first condition the item on the national economy comes first; in the second condition it comes after the political prime. At an aggregate level there is not much evidence of any question order effects. The mean score on economic evaluations does not vary between the two groups, and none of the individual cell values differ by very much. Similarly with respect to household economic evaluations there is no evidence of question order effects either and the mean between the two groups does not significantly differ (Table 2).

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Although these results are encouraging in that they suggest that there is no uniform bias, we cannot rule out the possibility that different types of people respond to the prime in different ways – which may then cancel out at the aggregate level. Indeed, we would expect the prime to have a positive effect on economic evaluations for those people who like the government and a negative effect for those people who dislike the government. To test this possibility we examine question order effects on evaluations of the economy by attitudes towards the government. Table 3 shows the results for evaluations of the national economy and Table 4 shows the results for the household economy.

The first thing to notice is that people who like the government a lot are much more favourable about the economy than people who dislike the government a lot. However, even conditioning on government approval we do not observe any question order effects. For example, among people who say they dislike the government a lot, the mean evaluation of the national economy barely changes from 2.11 when they are primed about the government to 2.19 when they are not. Within each category of government approval, none of the treatment effects are substantively large and none reach conventional levels of significance.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

There is thus little evidence to support the idea that economic evaluations are contaminated by their proximity to political items. As a further test we run two OLS regressions separately predicting evaluations of the household economy and national economy (on a 1–5 scale, with

5 as most positive), with independent variables of treatment (a dummy variable indicating the inclusion of the political prime relative to the absence of the prime), government approval (on a 1–5 scale, with 5 as most positive) and an interaction between treatment and government approval.² If economic evaluations are contaminated by the political prime then we should expect that the interaction term is positive and statistically significant. However, in neither case do we observe significant interactions (see Table 5).

Table 5 about here

Of course, one possibility that we ought to consider is the presence of priming effects in the opposite direction, whereby feelings towards the government are conditioned by economic perceptions. We therefore also consider the sensitivity of political evaluations to economic perceptions. Table 6 presents the results of two OLS regression models separately predicting government approval (on a 1–5 scale, with 5 as most positive), with independent variables of treatment (a dummy variable indicating the inclusion of the economic prime relative to the absence of the prime), and evaluations of either the household economy or the national economy (on a 1–5 scale, with 5 as most positive) and an interaction between treatment and economic evaluation. If government approval is contaminated by the economic prime then we should expect that the interaction term is positive and statistically significant. However, in neither case do we observe significant interactions (Table 6).

Table 6 about here

As one further check we also examine whether there are any question order effects by partisanship. The question on party identification is asked in a separate part of the questionnaire and so is free from any possible contamination from the survey experiment. However, once again we do not find any significant treatment effects (see Appendix B). These results all indicate that the standard survey items on the economy are free from contamination from political priming.

Conclusion

If attitudes towards the economy are conditioned by feelings for the incumbent government then we would expect to observe question order effects, where responses to the item on the economy vary according to its' placement in relation to the item on government approval.

² As the dependent variable is a 5-point scale, we have replicated these regression analyses with ordered probit models, with almost identical results.

However our results clearly show that this expectation is not realised. These findings provide a corrective to prior published work, which have reported question order effects. However, there are reasons to be sceptical about the external validity of some of these prior studies, based as they are on a population in a transitional democracy, a sample of students in the USA, and borderline significant results in the UK.

To a certain extent then the findings presented here should be reassuring to scholars of economic voting. Question order effects tend to occur when respondents use one question as a shortcut to answer the following question. Although we cannot rule out the possibility of ‘partisan cheer-leading’, we can be fairly confident that partisanship is not being used as an information shortcut to answer questions on the economy. This is important because it suggests that the standard survey items work reasonably well, and there is no apparent need to make them simpler or clearer (which can help to reduce question order effects). However, we should perhaps also be somewhat cautious about our findings – and a number of caveats are worth mentioning. Firstly, our experiment took place during a time of relatively low economic confidence. This may have made people less responsive to our prime. Economic evaluations may be subject to more partisan bias during times of relatively good economic performance when people are not so concerned about the economy – and so are perhaps more easily conditioned by political cues. Secondly, our experiment also took place during a time of relatively low government popularity. This may have influenced the effectiveness of our political prime and our experiment may therefore have been constrained by ceiling (or floor) effects - whereby economic evaluations couldn’t get much worse as a consequence of following the item on (low) government approval. As we have shown, replication is important, and in order to investigate these possibilities more systematically one avenue for future research is to undertake further replication studies at different stages of the political and economic cycle.

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Table 1 National Economy evaluations

	No prime (NatEcon 1 st)	Political prime (NatEcon 2 nd)
1 Got a lot worse	15	18
2 Got a little worse	23	23
3 Stayed the same	32	30
4 Got a little better	27	27
5 Got a lot better	2	2
Mean	2.77	2.73
Mean difference	t=0.578; p=0.563	
N	466	500

Table 2 Household Economy evaluations

	No prime HHEcon 1 st	Political prime HHEcon 2 nd
Got a lot worse	10	9
Got a little worse	23	28
Stayed the same	54	47
Got a little better	11	13
Got a lot better	3	4
Mean	2.75	2.75
Mean difference	t= 0.008; p=0.994	
N	519	471

Table 3

Mean evaluations of the National Economy by government approval

	No prime NatEcon 1 st	Political prime NatEcon 2 nd	Difference
Like a lot	3.55	3.91	0.37 (t=1.04)
Like a little	3.50	3.36	-0.14 (t=-1.08)
Neither like nor dislike	2.75	2.93	0.18 (t=1.70)
Dislike a little	2.91	2.73	-0.18 (t=-1.29)
Dislike a lot	2.19	2.11	-0.08 (t=-0.58)
N	471	519	

Table 4

Mean evaluations of the Household Economy by government approval

	No prime HHEcon 1 st	Political prime HHEcon 2 nd	Difference
Like a lot	3.12	3.36	0.24 (t=0.645)
Like a little	3.01	3.17	0.15 (t=1.226)
Neither like nor dislike	2.85	2.87	0.02 (t=0.272)
Dislike a little	2.75	2.73	-0.02 (t=-0.208)
Dislike a lot	2.37	2.40	0.03 (t=0.245)
N			

Table 5

Treatment effects on Economic evaluations, OLS models

	Household economy		National economy	
	B	SE	B	SE
Treatment	-0.14	0.14	-0.21	0.165
Gov approval	0.19****	0.036	0.35****	0.043
Treatment* Gov approval	0.07	0.053	0.08	0.061
Constant	2.30	0.100	1.97	0.120
R-square	0.07		0.14	
N	983		974	

Note: The dependent variable is economic evaluation measured on a 1-5 scale, where 1 = got a lot worse over the last 12 months and 5 = got a lot better over the last 12 months. Reference group for treatment is the economy item first.

Table 6

Treatment effects on Government approval, OLS models

	Government approval		Government approval	
	B	SE	B	SE
Treatment	0.17	0.22	0.17	0.19
HH econ	0.36****	0.05		
Nat econ			0.43****	0.04
Treatment* econ	-0.02	0.08	-0.03	0.07
Constant	1.40	0.16	1.22	0.13
R-square	0.08		0.16	
N	971		954	

Note: The dependent variable is government approval on a 1-5 scale. Reference group for treatment is the government item first.

Appendix A:

Experiment 1: National Economy

Order	Condition 1	Condition 2
1	How much do you like the current Conservative-led government? Do you... (1 Like them a lot; 2 Like them a bit; 3 Neither like or dislike them; 4 Dislike them a bit; or 5 Dislike them a lot?)	How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months? (1 Got a lot worse; 2 Got a little worse; 3 Stayed the same; 4 Got a little better; 5 Got a lot better)
2	How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months? (1 Got a lot worse; 2 Got a little worse; 3 Stayed the same; 4 Got a little better; 5 Got a lot better)	How much do you like the current Conservative-led government? Do you... (1 Like them a lot; 2 Like them a bit; 3 Neither like or dislike them; 4 Dislike them a bit; or 5 Dislike them a lot?)

Experiment 2: Household economy

Order	Condition 1	Condition 2
1	How much do you like the current Conservative-led government? Do you... (1 Like them a lot; 2 Like them a bit; 3 Neither like or dislike them; 4 Dislike them a bit; or 5 Dislike them a lot?)	How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago? (1 Got a lot worse; 2 Got a little worse; 3 Stayed the same; 4 Got a little better; 5 Got a lot better)
2	How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago? (1 Got a lot worse; 2 Got a little worse; 3 Stayed the same; 4 Got a little better; 5 Got a lot better)	How much do you like the current Conservative-led government? Do you... (1 Like them a lot; 2 Like them a bit; 3 Neither like or dislike them; 4 Dislike them a bit; or 5 Dislike them a lot?)

N = 2000; 500 per condition

Appendix B:

As a robustness check we also examined whether there were any question order effects when we conditioned on party identification rather than government approval. However, the results were almost exactly the same (Tables A1 and A2).

Table A1 Mean evaluations of the National Economy by party ID

	NatEcon 2 nd	NatEcon 1 st	Difference
Labour ID	2.56	2.65	-0.10 (t=-0.817)
Conservative	3.38	3.42	-0.04 (t=-0.303)
LD	3.03	3.06	-0.02 (t=-0.089)
Other	2.44	2.42	0.01 (t=0.061)
None	2.63	2.61	0.02 (t=0.175)
N	519	471	

Table A2 Mean evaluations of the Household Economy by party ID

	HHEcon 2 nd	HHEcon 1 st	Difference
Labour ID	2.64	2.68	-0.04 (t=-0.368)
Conservative	3.06	2.89	0.17 (t=1.397)
LD	2.83	2.66	0.21 (t=1.032)
Other	2.47	2.64	-0.161 (t=-0.780)
None	2.72	2.80	-0.08 (t=-0.764)
N			