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**The Dissertation Committee for Austin Ray Hart Certifies that this is the approved  
version of the following dissertation:**

**Campaigning for the Economic Vote:  
The Political Impact of Economic Rhetoric**

**Committee:**

---

Kurt Weyland, Supervisor

---

Daron Shaw, Co-Supervisor

---

Kenneth Greene

---

Raul Madrid

---

Nicholas Valentino

**Campaigning for the Economic Vote:  
The Political Impact of Economic Rhetoric**

**by**

**Austin Ray Hart, B.A.**

**Dissertation**

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# **Campaigning for the Economic Vote: The Political Impact of Economic Rhetoric**

Austin Ray Hart, Ph.D.

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Co-Supervisors: Kurt Weyland and Daron Shaw

Economic voting—the effect of national economic circumstances on vote preferences—is often seen as the closest thing to a law that exists in the social sciences. Why, then, do incumbents frequently win amidst economic downturns and challengers in economic boom times? I argue that the conventional wisdom fails because it leaves no room for political leadership. Rejecting the notion that candidates have little influence over when and to what extent economic voting occurs, I develop a campaign-centered theory that highlights candidates’ power to alter the strength of the economic vote strategically. Specifically, I draw on cognitive-psychological research on priming to argue that candidates’ decisions to emphasize or deemphasize economic issues in campaign messages—decisions which I argue are not endogenous to economic context—systematically condition voters’ willingness to hold governments accountable for past economic performance.

I test my argument against the conventional economic voting model by evaluating the impact of televised campaign ads in national elections in five countries. Combining quantitative analysis of public opinion data with original content analysis of both televised ads and newspaper stories, I show that the effect of economic campaign messages on the economic vote is profound. In some cases, the effect is electorally

decisive. In elections in which candidates focus on non-economic issues, however, evaluations of the nation's economic performance have little influence on vote preferences. Only when candidates focus squarely on economic issues do voters come to evaluate the candidates based on economic considerations. Notably, I show that this activating effect is driven by exposure to economic campaign ads in particular, not the campaign in general as conventional theory predicts. Electoral campaigns, therefore, can overcome structural conditions thought to hamstring electoral candidates. More generally, I show that, by reevaluating the psychology of economic voting in light of extensive research on priming, we can improve our understanding of election outcomes in both developed and developing democracies that conventional models treat as anomalous.

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## Chapter 1: The Economic Voting Puzzle

[T]he economic voting paradigm has come to rival other political behavior models—party identification, social cleavages, and issue voting... [I]t appears a worthy adversary.

– *Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007*

Retrospective economic voting is as close to a “law” of political behavior as exists in the social sciences. Extant theory argues quite simply that citizens hold elected officials accountable for national economic performance—using their votes to reward incumbents in good economic times and punish them amidst economic downturns. This structural model of voting asserts that economic context is the primary determinant of election outcomes. Even in light of the power of party identification, policy preferences, or social cleavages, and regardless of what candidates do or say during the campaign, macroeconomic forces move individual vote choices. Empirical evidence of this structural relationship is in no short supply.<sup>1</sup> Outside of academia, the belief that incumbent-party candidates win elections when times are good and lose when times are tough is conventional wisdom. Economic voting, it would seem, is ubiquitous.

Yet, despite the apparent preponderance of evidence and near-axiomatic status of retrospective economic voting, electoral outcomes often defy the predictions of this structural model. In perhaps the most infamous case of the failure of economic voting theory, a panel of top election forecasters convened at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association to deliver their prognostications for the United States presidential election just 70 days away. Armed with time-tested models of voting

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<sup>1</sup>For a thorough review of the economic voting literature in the American context, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000). From a comparative perspective, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2008).

behavior and sophisticated econometric techniques, these experts unanimously predicted a victory for Al Gore. Although the polls had the race at a dead heat, economic voting theory predicted that voters would eventually cast their ballot for the Democrat as a reward for the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed under President Clinton. Banking on this conventional wisdom, the question raised by the forecasters was not whether Gore would win, but rather by how much. While the consensus was that George W. Bush would lose by almost 6 points, the challenger overcame an extremely unfavorable economic context and won.<sup>2</sup>

This election, so important for the political fate of the United States, raises an important question. Namely, why do economic models fail to predict the winner in elections like this, where economic conditions make the outcome look foreordained? More than the inevitable error of a probabilistic model, I argue that this example belongs to a larger class of cases that conventional economic voting theory cannot explain. As detailed in the next section, the structure-driven model incorrectly predicts between 22% and 25% of presidential elections worldwide, including some of the most politically consequential in recent history. In light of these significant anomalies, the existing model is inadequate. We need a new theory of economic voting.

In this study I explain why incumbents regularly win amidst economic downturns and challengers in boom times. I account for the fact that some candidates drastically outperform the predictions of conventional economic voting models while others underperform. More than just accounting for seemingly anomalous elections, I also explain the conditions under which incumbents win in good times and lose in bad times.

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<sup>2</sup>A “post-mortem” of this panel was presented in a 2001 edition of *P.S.* Many of the chagrined modelers pointed to the influence of the campaign message as the cause of the error (Campbell 2001; Holbrook 2001; Lewis-Beck and Tien 2001; Wlezien 2001). Others hoped to “preserve” the economic voting hypothesis by arguing in hindsight that alternative economic indicators would have led to the correct prediction (Bartels and Zaller 2001).

To do so, I deviate from the existing approach and develop a campaign-centered theory that highlights the power of candidates to alter the strength of the economic vote strategically. I argue that the conventional wisdom fails because it leaves no room for political leadership. Broadly speaking, structural factors account reasonably well for patterns of stable politics but struggle to explain the numerous deviations. Political agents, on the other hand, have the capacity to override structural constraints and intervene in ways that interrupt normal patterns of political behavior. Thus, taking up one of the paradigmatic debates in political science, I present an agent-centered alternative to the conventional structural approach.

By contrast to the structural model, I show that candidates for elected office wield immense power over the strength of the economic vote via political communication and campaign strategy. Candidates are not passive observers of a structurally-determined political fate. Campaigners across the globe spend millions of dollars crafting their communications strategy and honing a message that will make certain issues salient in the minds of voters and shift others to the back burner. Recent evidence suggests these efforts may be successful. One of the most important findings to come out of the renewed interest in media and campaign effects in the last twenty years is that political communications can “prime,” or raise the salience of, certain issues in the minds of voters. These findings, however, have not been incorporated into the vast literature on economic voting.

In this study I bridge these broad but disparate fields and argue that the intensity of the economic campaign message—how often candidates speak about economic issues in televised ads—systematically conditions the weight citizens attach to economic considerations (i.e. the extent to which economic issues are primed). Therefore, a candidate’s decision about whether or not to address economic issues—which I argue is

neither random nor determined wholly by economic context—influences the strength of the economic vote and, by extension, the final vote tally. When candidates focus their rhetorical efforts on priming the economy (activation), the vote decision becomes a referendum on past economic performance. When candidates shift the public eye away from the economy (deactivation), voters evaluate candidates on non-economic issues. In activating cases, my argument implies that election outcomes will follow the predictions of the structural model. In deactivating cases, however, the results may diverge from structure. In this way, my approach accounts for both the “normal” pattern of politics and numerous deviations from it.

At the individual level, the core distinction between my argument and extant theory is my departure from the assumption that voters are “purposive agents who seek to assign credit or blame to incumbents [for economic performance]” (Anderson 2000, 152). Conventional theory is predicated on the notion that voters, as good democratic citizens, intend to behave as V.O. Key Jr.’s “rational god[s] of vengeance and reward,” reacting automatically and monolithically to economic context. Although some scholars argue that campaigns necessarily facilitate this process by reminding voters that the economy is good or bad (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005; Campbell 2000; Markus 1988), the particular choices candidates make during the campaign are seen as inconsequential (Gelman & King 1993: 420). Campaigns matter in this sense, but not because of rhetorical leadership or communication strategy. The expectation, therefore, is that electoral candidates are powerless to affect the strength of the economic vote or the final vote tally.

Rejecting the assumption that voters intend to cast an economic ballot, I adopt a cognitive-psychological approach that argues that individuals are more than economic voters. There are dozens of dimensions on which citizens can evaluate candidates for office and past economic performance is only one. Given the natural limits of human

cognition, voters can focus on only a few of these dimensions at once (e.g. Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Hinich and Munger 1997). The salience of these considerations changes over time and research demonstrates that the economy is not always at the top of the list (e.g. Edwards et al. 1995; Singer 2011). Thus, contrary to the assumption of the structural model, I argue that the economic vote does not assert itself automatically in the voter's mind. Instead economic retrospections must be activated, or primed, by external sources (e.g. Iyengar et al. 1984; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This affords to candidates a substantial capacity to alter the strength of the economic vote by amplifying or curtailing the intensity of economic campaign messages. I argue that the effect of these communications strategies is substantial, even electorally decisive.

My argument also offers an alternative to the increasingly orthodox “clarity of responsibility” hypothesis. Acknowledging the systematic limitations of the structural model, a growing number of scholars argue that voters do not hold incumbent-party candidates responsible for national economic performance because they are unable to assign credit or blame for economic outcomes (e.g. Alcañiz & Hellwig 2011; Alesina & Rosenthal 1995; Anderson 1995; 2000; Duch & Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993; van der Brug et al. 2007; Whitten and Palmer 1999).<sup>3</sup> This thesis refines the conventional theory by appending an institutional filter to a necessarily structural base. It assumes that voters intend to cast an economic vote but are sometimes stymied by political institutions and political structures that make responsibility for economic outcomes unclear. If the finance minister is not from the ruling party, for instance, voters cannot determine if the incumbent deserves credit for economic growth, and the economic vote weakens. The clarity of responsibility hypothesis, however, is an

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson (2007) provides a detailed review of this “contingency dilemma” and its proposed causes.

insufficient fix to the structural model. First, it eschews the importance of electoral candidates, and, as I show, these political agents can systematically prime or neutralize economic issues. Second, it relies on the simplified and empirically incorrect assumption that voters necessarily intend to behave as economic voters. As a result, it cannot explain deviations from the structural model as well as my campaign-centered approach.

To test my argument against extant economic voting theory, I analyze the political impact of televised economic campaign messages in seven national elections in five countries. I focus especially on the 1992 and 2000 United States presidential elections and the 2000 and 2006 Mexican presidential elections (often referred to hereafter as US 1992, US 2000, MX 2000, and MX 2006). I then evaluate the generalizability of these findings in elections in South Korea, West Germany, and Canada. In all cases, the analyses reveal that campaign strategy and political communications systematically condition the economic vote. More broadly, the results demonstrate the power of political leaders to overcome structural conditions thought to advantage or disadvantage incumbent candidates and begin to explain the seemingly anomalous victories of challengers in economic booms and reelection of incumbents in busts.

## **THE INSUFFICIENCY OF CONVENTIONAL ECONOMIC VOTING MODELS**

The conventional wisdom holds that national economic performance dictates incumbent electoral success. As Tufte (1978: 65) asserts, “[w]hen you think economics, think elections; when you think elections, think economics.” At the individual-level, the reward-punishment hypothesis underlying the conventional economic voting model assumes that the voter consults her opinion of the nation’s economic performance and

casts her ballot accordingly (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Norpoth 2004).<sup>4</sup> As Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000: 183) summarize, “The citizen votes for the government if the economy is doing all right; otherwise, the vote is against.” Thus, the expectation is that incumbents are victorious when economic times are good and challengers triumph when times are tough. Numerous studies evidence this political-economic correspondence in countries across the globe—in presidential elections (e.g. Fiorina 1981), parliamentary elections (e.g. Butler and Stokes 1969; Sanders 2003), developed democracies (e.g. Lewis-Beck and Mitchell 2000), developing democracies (e.g. Pacek and Radcliff 1995), and post-socialist democracies (e.g. Anderson et al. 2003).<sup>5</sup> This pattern is not regionally restricted. Cross-national studies identify economic voting across Western Europe (e.g. Chappell and Veiga 2000), Central Europe (e.g. Tucker 2001), Latin America (e.g. Remmer 1991), Africa (e.g. Bratton et al. 2005) and a worldwide sample (e.g. Wilkin et al. 1997). Yet, as Al Gore, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, John Major, Richard Nixon, and numerous others can attest, predictions derived from the conventional model and actual election outcomes are often at odds.

Despite the near axiomatic status of the economic vote, the conventional structure-driven model is inadequate as a model of voting behavior and as a model of electoral outcomes. The deficiency of extant theory is evident at three levels of analysis: across countries, over numerous elections within a country, and at the individual level. Cross-nationally, the extant model incorrectly predicts the winner in a staggering 25% of

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<sup>4</sup>Although some scholars have argued that economic voting is prospective (e.g. Downs 1957; Lockerbie 2008; MacKuen et al. 1992) and/or egocentric (notably Kiewiet 1983), retrospective sociotropic voting remains the conventional view. Alvarez and Nagler (1995, 1998), Kinder and Kiewiet (1981), and Norpoth (2004) take up these questions and find strong evidence in support of the retrospective sociotropic approach.

<sup>5</sup>For a thorough review of the economic voting literature, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000, 2007). From a strictly comparative perspective, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2008). Other reviews include: Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Monroe 1984; Nannestad and Paldam 1994; Norpoth 1996.

presidential elections. To calculate this percentage, I regressed incumbent-party victory (a dichotomous variable) on previous economic performance for 114 free and fair presidential elections (as scored by Freedom House) across 22 developed and developing countries since 1974. In elections with multiple rounds of voting, I focus on first-round results. Using the estimated logistic coefficients, I predicted the victor in each election and compared it against the observed election outcome. Table 1.1 displays the results. Note that details about data collection, variable construction, and coefficient estimates of all models in this chapter are provided in the Appendix.

On the one hand, the results reinforce the belief that there is indeed a connection between national economic performance and election outcomes. The model correctly predicts 75% of elections. Yet, the fact that political outcomes defy structural conditions in 1 of 4 cases highlights the systematic limitation of the conventional wisdom. Clearly, the 2000 U.S. election is not a unique aberration. Instead, it belongs to a larger class of election outcomes that the structural economic voting model cannot explain. What is more, the predictions are invalid in a number of the most politically consequential elections in recent history.

One might object, however, that the cross-national analysis stacks the deck against extant theory because it includes elections from developing nations. Although evidence of economic voting in the developing world is prevalent (Canton and Jorrot 2002; Pacek 1994; Posner and Simon 2002; Remmer 1991), some scholars argue that the economy-vote link is less robust outside the OECD context (notably Paldam 1991). If true, the results in Table 1.1 may overstate the limitations of dominant theory.

The conclusion is the same, however, if I alleviate this concern and evaluate the conventional wisdom at the national level. Here I estimate a model of economic voting

Table 1.1: Predicted vs. Observed Election Outcomes in 22 Democracies

		<b>Observed Election Outcome</b>	
		<i>Incumbent Loss</i>	<i>Incumbent Win</i>
<b>Predicted Outcome</b>	<i>Incumbent Loss</i>	Argentina 1983 Argentina 1989 Argentina 1999 Argentina 2003 Bolivia 1993 Bolivia 1997 Bolivia 2005 Bolivia 2002 Brazil 1989 Colombia 2002 Costa Rica 1982 Costa Rica 1990 Costa Rica 1994 Costa Rica 1998 Costa Rica 2006 Croatia 2000 Croatia 2010 Dominican Rep 1996 Ecuador 1992 Ecuador 1996 Ecuador 1998 Ecuador 2002 Ecuador 2006  South Korea 1992 South Korea 1997 South Korea 2007 Lithuania 1998 Lithuania 2004 Poland 1995 Portugal 1986 Romania 2000 Ukraine 2004 Ukraine 2010 Uruguay 1989 Uruguay 1994 Uruguay 1999 Uruguay 2004 United States 1992 United States 2008 Venezuela 1998  N = 48 (42%)	Bolivia 1989 Costa Rica 1986 Costa Rica 2002 Dominican Rep 2000 Ecuador 2009 France 1974 Honduras 1997 South Korea 2002 Lithuania 2003 Mexico 2006 Poland 2000 Paraguay 2003  N = 12 (11%)
	<i>Incumbent Win</i>	Brazil 2002 Chile 2010 Dominican Rep 2004 El Salvador 2009 France 1981 France 2007 Honduras 2005 Lithuania 2009 Mexico 2000 Nicaragua 2006 Poland 2005 Portugal 2006 Paraguay 2008 Romania 2004 United States 2000 Venezuela 1983  N = 16 (14%)	Argentina 1995 Argentina 2007 Bolivia 1985 Brazil 2006 Brazil 1998 Chile 1993 Chile 2000 Chile 2006 Colombia 1994 Colombia 1998 Colombia 2006 Colombia 2010 Croatia 2005 Dominican Rep 2008 El Salvador 1994 El Salvador 1999 El Salvador 2004 Finland 2006 France 1988 France 1995 France 2002 Nicaragua 1996 Nicaragua 2001 Portugal 1991 Portugal 1996 Portugal 2001 Romania 1996 Romania 2009 Ukraine 1999 Uruguay 2009 United States 1984 United States 1988 United States 1996 United States 2004 Venezuela 1988 Venezuela 2000 Venezuela 2006  N = 38 (33%)

Note: Predictions derived from a model regressing incumbent-party victory (in the first round of multi-round elections) in presidential elections on lagged economic indicators. Elections are excluded from the model based on lack of economic data, the occurrence of civil war, or because the election is not seen as "free and fair." The highlighted quadrants represent incorrect predictions.

for 32 U.S. presidential elections from 1880 to 2004.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. is a “hard test” for critics of the conventional wisdom because its longstanding two-party system and stable economic performance ought to produce one of the most robust patterns of economic voting in the world. Furthermore, focusing on a single country allows me to generate predicted vote totals rather than simply predicted winners. This permits an analysis of the accuracy of the conventional model in addition to its validity. Table 1.2 charts both the observed and predicted vote for each election.

The predictions and prediction errors again underscore the limitations of conventional economic voting theory. The results confirm the findings from the cross-national analysis: the forecasted winner lost in 22% of elections (denoted by gray shading). Thus, systematic errors are common even when the model is expected to perform at its best. The model is also highly inaccurate. In elections where the model correctly forecasts the winner, the predicted vote totals are off by as much as 8 points. As prominent pollster Stan Greenberg (2009) poignantly noted, “Missing the final vote by up to 8 points, as [these] forecasts often do, would have gotten me fired.”

Finally, the limitation of extant theory is evident even at the individual level. Although the ultimate goal is to understand aggregate-level political outcomes, economic voting is fundamentally an individual-level behavior. Thus, it is necessary to demonstrate a deficiency at the microfoundational level. I focus again on voters in the U.S. because of data availability. The American National Election Study (ANES) provides comparable survey data—consistent question wording and response options—for elections back to 1980.<sup>7</sup> I regress a dichotomous measure of reported vote choice—

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<sup>6</sup>The model is based on Fair’s (1976) widely cited model. See the appendix for details on data, model specification, model estimates, and detailed discussion.

<sup>7</sup>The data actually goes back further, but respondents have only been asked to judge national economic performance since 1980. Thus, I focus on the 8 election years since.

Table 1.2: Robustness of Economic Voting Models in the United States (1880-2004)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Incumbent-Party Candidate</i>	<i>Challenger (2-party contest)</i>	<i>Observed Vote for Incumbent</i>	<i>Predicted Vote for Incumbent<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Prediction Error (Pred - Obs)</i>
1880	Garfield*	Hancock	50.22	54.42	4.20
1884	Blaine	Cleveland*	49.85	48.21	-1.64
1888	Cleveland	Harrison*	50.41	50.11	-0.30
1892	Harrison	Cleveland*	48.27	56.41	8.14
1896	Jennings Bryan	McKinley*	47.76	44.65	-3.11
1900	McKinley*	Jennings Bryan	53.17	54.27	1.10
1904	Roosevelt*	Parker	60.01	52.77	-7.24
1908	Taft*	Jennings Bryan	54.48	48.82	-5.66
1912	Roosevelt	Wilson*	54.71	57.93	3.22
1916	Wilson*	Hughes	51.68	51.94	0.26
1920	Cox	Harding*	36.12	40.93	4.81
1924	Coolidge*	Davis	58.24	54.16	-4.09
1928	Hoover*	Smith	58.82	54.10	-4.72
1932	Hoover	Roosevelt*	40.84	43.25	2.41
1936	Roosevelt*	Landon	62.46	62.19	-0.27
1940	Roosevelt*	Willkie	55.00	58.88	3.88
1944	Roosevelt*	Dewey	53.77	52.71	-1.06
1948	Truman*	Dewey	52.37	52.38	0.01
1952	Stevenson	Eisenhower*	44.60	51.10	6.50
1956	Eisenhower*	Stevenson	57.76	52.98	-4.79
1960	Nixon	Kennedy*	49.91	49.55	-0.36
1964	Johnson*	Goldwater	61.34	60.45	-0.90
1968	Humphrey	Nixon*	49.60	52.77	3.18
1972	Nixon*	McGovern	61.79	54.21	-7.58
1976	Ford	Carter*	48.95	48.25	-0.70
1980	Carter	Reagan*	44.70	48.92	4.22
1984	Reagan*	Mondale	59.17	56.95	-2.22
1988	H.W. Bush*	Dukakis	53.90	49.13	-4.77
1992	H.W. Bush	Clinton*	46.55	51.85	5.31
1996	Clinton*	Dole	54.74	54.29	-0.44
2000	Gore	W. Bush*	50.27	52.54	2.27 <sup>b</sup>
2004	W. Bush*	Kerry	51.23	51.56	0.32

Highlighted rows reflect incorrect predictions. Asterisks (\*) denote the winning candidate.

a. Represents the predicted two-party vote share for the incumbent-party candidate. Predictions are derived from the conventional economic voting model described in the text.

b. The model is correct in the prediction of Gore as the winner of the popular vote. Given the narrow observed margin of victory, I argue that model's prediction of 52.24% implies a Gore victory. Thus, the model is incorrect.

for or against the incumbent-party candidate—on past economic performance, party identification, and a vector of controls. Following Duch and Armstrong (2009), I input objective economic performance rather than subjective evaluations.<sup>8</sup> I then predict vote choice for each respondent and compare this against the reported vote. In line with the prior analyses, the model incorrectly predicts about 20% of reported votes—a sizable error given that the model also includes party identification. Yet the substantive implication is not immediately clear. If the errors are distributed evenly from election to election and for each candidate, the model may perform adequately.

To evaluate this possibility I aggregate the individual-level predictions to generate the predicted incumbent vote share in each election. The predicted versus reported vote totals for each election are presented in Table 1.3. The clustering of errors in particular elections and the degree of bias is immediately evident. The model incorrectly predicts 4

Table 1.3: Predictions from the Individual-Level Model of Economic Voting

<i>U.S. Election</i>	<i>Predicted Vote (%)</i>	<i>Reported Vote from ANES (%)</i>	<i>Error (Predicted - Reported)</i>
1980	51.81	43.32	8.49
1984	51.72	58.37	-6.64
1988	49.45	52.95	-3.50
1992	43.22	40.86	2.36
1996	58.84	58.14	0.70
2000	58.97	53.27	5.70
2004	46.59	50.07	-3.48
2008	31.26	34.28	-3.02

Note: Predicted vote totals represent the aggregation of individual-level vote predictions from the model of economic voting described in the text and in the appendix. Shaded cells represent incorrect predictions.

<sup>8</sup>The choice is made to eliminate the possibility that the results are capturing endogeneity between vote choice and economic perceptions, rather than the influence of economic context on vote choice. As a check, I also estimated the model using subjective evaluations. The substantive conclusions remain unchanged. Estimates and discussion of these models are presented in the appendix.

of the 8 U.S. presidential elections since 1980. Furthermore, the model is again seen to be inaccurate, missing the vote tally by over 8 points in 1980.

The assumption that voters evaluate elected officials based on their management of the economy is often taken as an incontrovertible truth in the social sciences. Yet, across three different levels of analysis, and even in the “hard case” of U.S. presidential elections, extant theory fails to predict about 1 in 4 election outcomes. Together, these results demonstrate the insufficiency of the conventional, structure-driven model. The puzzle of economic voting, therefore, lies in the contradiction between the social scientist’s belief that the voter turns to her opinion of the nation’s economic context when evaluating the incumbent-party candidate and the fact that this expectation is too often at odds with political reality. This study attempts to solve this puzzle and explain why political outcomes so often deviate from structural context despite the ingrained belief that economic performance drives voting behavior.

### **THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF**

In this study I develop a campaign-centered theory of economic voting as an alternative to the conventional structure-driven model. Against the standard expectation that political candidates have little influence over when and to what extent economic voting occurs, I argue that the intensity of the economic campaign message systematically conditions the strength of the economic vote. More than the generic “campaigns matter,” I contend that campaign strategy and campaign rhetoric alter the weight voters attach to perceptions of national economic performance and that the resulting effect on election outcomes is sizable, even decisive in some cases.

Campaigning is a series of choices about what to say and how often to say it. Thus, I argue that candidates who wish to shape the economic vote do so by making decisions about the type of economic message they present to the public and the extent to which that message is the focus of the campaign. Specifically, they have two communications strategies at their disposal: activation and deactivation.<sup>9</sup> Candidates who pursue an activating strategy increase the intensity of campaign messages that highlight the national economic context or economic issues more broadly. Individual-level exposure to activating messages strengthens the economy-vote link by increasing the salience of economic considerations in voters' minds. This primes voters to evaluate candidates along economic lines. Deactivation is precisely the opposite—muting the intensity of economic messages to divert public attention away from economic issues. The aim is to shift the public eye away from economic considerations, or to keep the public eye away from them, by highlighting non-economic issues. In a competitive campaign environment in which candidates are airing both types of ads, the strength of the economic vote will depend on the balance of an individual's exposure to activating ads relative to deactivating ads.

With these strategies, I contend that candidates are not victims of economic context. Instead, they have the capacity to manipulate the economic vote strategically. As such, candidates can capitalize on favorable economic conditions or, contrary to the predictions of conventional theory, overcome disadvantageous conditions.

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<sup>9</sup>Each of these strategies is oriented towards altering the salience of economic considerations. It is likely that this is not the only effect of economic campaign messages. For instance, messages could alter voters' opinions of national economic performance by focusing on a particular dimension of economic performance—a framing effect. While these effects may be politically consequential, I argue that effects on salience should be more prevalent. Thus, I leave the additional effects of economic campaign messages to future researchers.

One might wonder, however, if candidate choices are determined wholly by context. Presumably, activation is an appealing strategy for incumbents in good times and challengers in bad times, while deactivation is appealing to incumbents in poor times and challengers in good times. If campaigns follow this expectation, priming is merely the mechanism that drives the conventional economic voting model, not a competing theory of election outcomes.

Although it is not my aim in this dissertation to present a theory of campaign strategy, I argue that candidate rhetoric is an exogenous force, not just a reflection of prevailing economic conditions. Throughout the empirical chapters, I find that communication strategies deviate from the conventional expectation. In some elections, all candidates attempt to activate the economic vote. In others, none of the candidates pursue an activating strategy. These choices, at least in many cases, are more than just a matter of naive miscalculation. Instead, I argue that a candidate's prior reputation and her party's history of issue ownership, particularly in multiparty elections, sometimes drive incumbents to emphasize the economy in bad times and challengers to deemphasize the economy in good times.

With respect to voters, my argument is predicated on the assumption that citizens engage in satisficing rather than rational utility maximization when choosing candidates. Beyond economic performance, there are numerous criteria voters could utilize to assess candidates. When faced with a complex evaluative task like voting, however, individuals do not call forth all relevant considerations in memory. Instead voters limit the cognitive cost of decision-making by satisficing—surveying only the most “available” considerations in the mind (Simon, 1979). When exposure to external stimuli activates a relevant evaluative dimension, the weight attached to that dimension in the vote calculus increases (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Economic considerations,

therefore, are not permanent fixtures in a static voting equation. Instead, the economic vote depends on exposure to external stimuli. In the context of an election, televised economic campaign ads are the most important source of these stimuli.

Existing research provides a solid foundation for the central argument presented here. The extensive media priming literature demonstrates that issue salience increases with exposure to news stories on that issue, including foreign policy (e.g. Krosnick and Brannon 1993), Social Security (e.g. Johnston et al. 2004), European Union Integration (Anderson 2003), free trade (e.g. Johnston et al. 1992), racial attitudes (e.g. Valentino et al. 2002), and the economy (e.g. Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Mutz 1992). There is reason to believe that campaign ads have a similar effect on voters. Experimental evidence demonstrates that exposure to political advertisements can persuade viewers (e.g. Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Brader, 2005; Gerber et al., 2007; Valentino et al., 2004; Greene 2011), mobilize voters (Ansolabehere et al., 1994) and prime particular considerations (Gerber et al., 2011; Mendelberg, 2001). A number of observational studies reach a similar conclusion (e.g. Shaw, 1999; Johnston et al., 2004). Notably, Vavreck (2009) finds that economic campaign messages shape the political agenda.<sup>10</sup> Although this implies that campaigns may prime the economic vote, Vavreck provides no test of priming. Thus, despite ample evidence, these findings have not been integrated into a theory of economic voting. My study bridges this gap.

Even the basic empirical evidence in this chapter suggests the dynamics of political competition is a key moderator of the economic vote. Specifically, the results in Table 1.2 point to campaign communications as one possible explanation for the errors of the conventional model. There is a notable temporal clustering of incorrect predictions in

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<sup>10</sup>Singer (2009) makes a similar argument in the case of Mexico.

the modern era. Strikingly, the conventional model incorrectly predicts 5 of 14 U.S. presidential elections since 1952 but only 2 of the prior 18. This implies that the model “breaks down” in Dwight D. Eisenhower’s victory over Adlai Stevenson. Perhaps not coincidentally, the 1952 election was the first time televised ads were used in a presidential campaign. Spots like the infamous “Ike for President” ad changed political campaigns the world over. Suddenly candidates could reach more voters and present their message on their own terms. The exhausting “whistle stop” tours and extemporaneous public speeches that lifted Harry Truman to a surprising victory only four years earlier quickly gave way to a barrage of 30-second clips replete with catchy jingles and carefully crafted rhetoric. My argument implies that the expansion of an audience for campaign messages coincided with a spike in the capacity of candidates to shape the economic vote.

Thus, a campaign-centered theory provides a parsimonious explanation of the numerous deviations from economic structure in the modern era. Can it also explain the numerous election outcomes that follow the conventional expectation? If voters are pushed around by campaign communications, why are violations of the economic voting model not more frequent? The answer is that the influence of a candidate’s strategy, particularly in two-party elections, is often mitigated by the opponent’s strategy. If incumbents choose an activating strategy in good times and challengers a deactivating strategy, the overall influence may be null. To the outside observer, then, it would appear that election outcomes follow economic structure when it may be that campaign rhetoric often, though not always, follows structure. The influence of the campaign, then, is most noticeable when rhetoric deviates from the conventional expectation (e.g. when an incumbent deemphasizes economic issues in an economic boom), when one candidate has the resources to out advertise his opponents, and when candidates suddenly change

strategies. As a result, my theory provides leverage on seemingly deviant election outcomes as well as conforming outcomes. Thus, rather than negate entirely the importance of structure and assert that the vote is completely “constructed,” this study highlights the crucial importance of political agency in the study of economic voting and underscores the need to integrate campaign strategy into a theory of economic voting.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELECTIONS UNDER STUDY**

My argument suggests that the key determinant of the economic vote, and a key to understanding election outcomes, is the number of economic campaign messages candidates televise relative to the number of non-economic messages they televise (i.e. the intensity of the economic message). The cases analyzed in this study were selected based on their score on this central moderating variable (i.e. conditioning the influence of economic retrospections on vote preference). Economic issues were clearly the focal point of the MX 2006 and US 1992 campaigns. In MX 2006, the campaigns after April 2006 framed the vote largely as a choice between “the jobs president” who promised to maintain Mexico’s economic stability, Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN), and a candidate who promised to fight against inequality on behalf of the poor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). Similarly, US 1992 is memorable because of the famous advice James Carville posted on the wall of the Clinton War Room: “the economy, stupid!” By contrast, economic messages were notably absent in the MX 2000 and US 2000 campaigns. After more than 70 years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Mexican voters demanded change in 2000. The campaign focused largely on the future of Mexican politics and made little mention of the PRI’s recent economic success under popular President Ernesto Zedillo.

The same is true of the US 2000 campaign in which Democrat Al Gore made almost no effort to link himself to the unprecedented prosperity under Clinton.

My priming theory suggests that the candidates' messaging strategies in these elections altered both the strength of the economic vote and the final vote tally. First, come election day, the economic vote should be strong in the two activating elections—US 1992 and MX 2006—and weak in the deactivating elections—US 2000 and MX 2000. This effect of campaign rhetoric can also be observed at the individual level, where voters across states and media markets are exposed to very different levels of campaign activity. In both low and high intensity elections, some voters are exposed to far more economic ads than others. Crucially, these differences are not merely a reflection of the fact that some voters come from places that are struggling or booming economically and others do not. Rhetoric is an exogenous force, not simply a consequence of actual conditions. As such, the economic vote should strengthen with a voter's exposure to economic ads.

On the one hand, this set of predictions is basic. On the other hand, it explains why voters held George H.W. Bush accountable for his domestic economic troubles but not his numerous foreign policy successes; why Al Gore did not benefit from a prosperous economy; why the PRI fell despite solid economic stewardship under Ernesto Zedillo; and why Felipe Calderón eked out a narrow victory over a charismatic challenger. Rather than inevitable conclusions, I argue that these outcomes would have been different had the candidates chosen different economic messaging strategies.

Second, my argument implies that the conditioning effect of economic campaign messages is dynamic within the campaign. At any fixed point in the campaign, the economic vote varies across individuals based on contemporaneous differences in exposure to the economic message. Because the conditioning effect of economic

campaign ads decays in the short run,<sup>11</sup> the strength of the economic vote fluctuates as a voter's exposure ebbs and flows through the campaign. Theoretically, this within-campaign variation is important in pinpointing the conditioning effect of campaign ads and differentiating it from the effect both of the campaign more generally and of objective economic circumstances, which are constant during the cases under study. This necessitates within-campaign analysis. More than a methodological point, this dynamic implication is also of substantive import. Campaigns are not one-shot events. Instead, candidates constantly maneuver to find the right message, respond to new attacks or distractions, and edge out their opponents. My theory provides explanatory leverage on the effectiveness of these decisions. It helps account, for instance, for Calderón's sudden surge in the polls after his dramatic mid-campaign switch to the economic message in MX 2006; or President George H.W. Bush's late election push on the heels of a switch to a values-based distraction strategy.

### **THE CASE AGAINST CAMPAIGN STRATEGY**

To some, the argument that campaigns and campaign communications have substantively meaningful effects on both individual-level behavior and aggregate-level election outcomes is almost self-evident. Given the time, effort, and money necessary to orchestrate a campaign, it is difficult to imagine that it could be all for naught. However, as decades of research on voting behavior demonstrate, positing campaign effects and identifying them empirically are very different enterprises. Given the notorious difficulty

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<sup>11</sup>Iyengar and Kinder (1987) find that agenda-setting effects persist (albeit less powerfully) one week after exposure. I take this to be strong evidence of the treatment's effect, but see no reason to assume the effect is long term. While they present no test for the persistence of priming effects, the claim that issue-salience decays over time, and in the absence of activating stimuli, is consistent with existing findings (e.g. Druckman and Nelson 2003). Recently, Gerber et al. (2011) reach a similar conclusion about the duration of the persuasive impact of ads.

of the latter, a large body of research concludes that campaigns matter only at the margins, if at all. The earliest studies of voting behavior found that election campaigns had very little persuasive effect on voters, paling in comparison to the influence of ongoing national or international events (notably Lazarsfeld et al. 1948).

With this, the “minimal effects” hypothesis was born. Campaigns, it seemed, did little but reinforce longstanding political predispositions (Berelson et al. 1954). To the extent that citizens switched their votes, it was most often because of interaction with a friend or colleague. Exposure to campaign information appeared to have little influence on vote decisions. Furthermore, Campbell et al. (1960) found that the vote was based largely on stable patterns of group membership and enduring party identification. Together these findings catalyzed the last 70 years of inquiry into, and debate over, “minimal” versus “significant” campaign effects.<sup>12</sup> In the end, research suggests that campaigns affect voters in important, albeit subtle, ways (e.g. priming and framing). Yet, evidence from U.S. presidential elections suggests that these effects, even if significant, are not widespread (e.g. Hillygus and Shields, 2008) and alter the final vote tally very little (notably Bartels 1993; Campbell 2000; Finkel 1993).

The standard expectation, therefore, is that candidates for elected office cannot manipulate the economic vote strategically. Instead, their efforts are easily overwhelmed by the omnipresent influence of economic structure and individual-level partisan resistance (e.g. Duch and Stevenson 2008). Lenz’s (2009) recent critique of the media priming and campaign priming literature buttresses the case against campaigns. Although priming effects are often taken as a given—assumed to be the inevitable

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<sup>12</sup>Some scholars argue that this divide is contrived. Clearly, the “minimal effects” hypothesis is more than the caricatured “no effects” hypothesis that some researchers employ as a straw man. However, I contend that significant differences persist in the way researchers understand the influence of the campaign. Shaw (2006) provides a thorough review of this debate and the dividing lines.

outgrowth of agenda setting—Lenz argues that conventional priming studies, both experimental and observational, fail to rule out reverse causality. The priming hypothesis assumes that raising an issue’s salience causes voters to align their overall evaluation of the president with their preexisting assessment of him on that issue. Precisely the opposite, the projection hypothesis assumes that, after exposure to an issue, voters align their opinion on that issue with their preexisting assessment of the president’s overall performance.<sup>13</sup> Motivated reasoning theory (Kunda 1990) suggests this is highly plausible in a partisan environment where voters are motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion.

In four cases of apparent priming, Lenz (2009) finds that campaign messages inform voters of the candidate’s stances and voters then adopt the position of their preferred candidate as their own. The implication for campaign effects is substantial. If projection holds, campaigns do little more than prompt voters to defend their partisanship. Mistakenly concluding that the campaign primes voters is especially worrisome in the case of economic voting, where there are real concerns about the endogeneity of economic perceptions to vote choice (e.g. Wilcox & Wlezien 1996; Wlezien et al. 1997; Anderson et al. 2004; Evans & Andersen 2006).

Even efforts to resuscitate campaign effects in light of these critiques raise serious questions about the capacity of economic campaign strategies to condition the strength of the economic vote. “Enlightened preference” theory contends that the campaign’s primary effect is to inform voters which issues are important and where the candidates stand on those issues (Gelman and King 1993; also Anderson et al. 2005). This “enlightenment” augments the weight of the fundamental variables in the vote calculus,

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<sup>13</sup> Note that, while I adopt Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) definition of projection, some studies (e.g. Conover and Feldman 1982; Markus and Converse 1979) define the term as the process by which voters assign their own issue positions to their favored candidate.

including economic perceptions.<sup>14</sup> The expectation, then, is that the campaign necessarily causes a linear increase in the economic vote throughout the campaign.

On the surface, this appears to be a clear argument in favor of substantively meaningful campaign effects. Yet, if the inevitable outcome is the edification of the state of the union, then the true effect of the campaign is simply to bring the final vote total in line with the predictions of the conventional structural model. This should be true regardless of what candidates say or do during the campaign. Felipe Calderón's sudden and concerted effort to activate the economic vote mid-campaign in MX 2006, for instance, is assumed to be of little importance. Neither the strength of the economic vote nor the final vote tally would have changed had the PAN standard-bearer stuck with his original message of honesty and transparency.

How can this be? The answer is that the key cause is neither the *strategic choices* candidates make nor the *messages* they disseminate, but the mere occurrence of the campaign. As Gelman and King (1993: 420) argue, "although presidential campaigns have an important effect, what is relevant is their *existence*." So long as electoral campaigns are run, therefore, the predictions derived from this approach mirror those of the conventional economic voting model: electoral outcomes follow economic structure.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it casts doubt on the role of economic campaign messages in conditioning the economic vote. Specifically, it assumes that economic retrospections will become increasingly predictive of vote preference in any campaign (i.e. that deviations from the conventional model will decrease independent of candidate rhetoric).

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<sup>14</sup>Campbell (2000) argues that campaigns activate the economy-vote link in particular because at least one candidate always stands to gain from appealing to economic context.

<sup>15</sup>In some sense, the difference between my interpretation of "enlightened preference theory" and the contemporary understanding comes down to a disagreement over the concept of a "political campaign." Ought the campaign be thought of holistically—as a one-shot event devoid of particularities—or dynamically—as a series of consequential decisions made by the candidates? More than mere semantics, the choice of understanding has massive substantive implications.

My priming model, by contrast, holds that particular messaging strategies actually deactivate the economic vote (i.e. that deviations will get larger in direct response to rhetorical choices).

### **WHY THIS STUDY IS DIFFERENT: OVERCOMING “MINIMAL EFFECTS”**

Despite the uncertain outlook for a campaign-centered theory of economic voting, I argue that there are three compelling reasons to believe this study can identify substantively meaningful campaign effects. First, I employ a comparative research design that includes two elections from a new democracy. Research on campaign effects is overwhelmingly focused on national elections in longstanding democracies, particularly in the U.S. Yet effects are notoriously difficult to identify in established democracies where there may be parity in campaign effort and partisan resistance to campaign messages is strong. By contrast, in a new democracy like Mexico, party identification is weak and the flow of campaign information is often unbalanced. In this context, Greene (2011) argues that campaigns can alter the vote by up to 12% (also Finkel 1995). Furthermore, Calderón’s dramatic shift to the economic message in MX 2006 serves as something of a natural experiment. The sudden “injection” of economic messages into the electorate provides a rare opportunity to assess the effect of campaign messages in particular. In an established democracy where the message is relatively static, underlying campaign effects are less likely to be observed in traditional analyses. Thus, rather than inadvertently stack the deck against the conventional wisdom in favor of finding campaign effects, exploiting this shift actually allows for a fair assessment of these competing claims.

Second, despite Lenz's (2009) rebuff of existing priming studies, there is reason to believe that economic campaign messages do actually prime the economic vote rather than merely induce partisan projection. Lenz's analysis focuses on cases of apparent priming on positional issues like support for European integration. Campaign priming is far likelier, however, on issues for which voters have strong prior attitudes: on "easy issues" (Carmines and Stimson 1989) like race (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002) and economic performance. As Lenz (2009: 834) suggests, "priming may [] occur with valence issues, such as the economy, as such issues may be generally easier for citizens to understand." Even so, in the absence of experimental data, campaign priming can only be demonstrated through the analysis of panel data. No study has taken the necessary steps to assess definitively whether campaign messages prime voters or merely induce projection.

Finally, existing studies of campaign effects fail to provide a rigorous test of the effect of campaign messages. This is as true of those who claim minimal effects as those who claim significant effects. Such a substantial limitation is surprising given the renewed interest in campaign effects over the last twenty years. Yet existing analyses often ignore either the content of candidates' messages (e.g. Huber & Arceneaux 2006), the frequency of their dissemination (e.g. Vavreck 2009), or both (e.g. Gelman & King 1993; Matthews & Johnston 2010). In some cases, these omissions are a matter of data availability. For others, the choice to ignore these key measures stems from their holistic conceptualization of "the campaign," divorced of any particularities. Regardless, these difficulties in measuring the key treatment variable confound estimates of the true effect of the campaign message or the particular choices candidates make within campaigns. By contrast, I test my argument using direct measures of what candidates say and how often they say it.

To address the limitations of previous work, this study not only improves conceptualization and measurement, but also broadens the scope of analysis by including cases from a new democracy. Lastly, it takes the necessary methodological steps to overcome concerns that what may appear to be important campaign effects are actually evidence of partisan learning and rationalization. Thus, this study advances the literature on political campaigns in a way that allows for a compelling empirical test of the minimal effects thesis against the campaign-centered theory of economic voting developed here.

#### **WHY THE “CLARITY OF RESPONSIBILITY” CANNOT RESCUE THE STRUCTURAL MODEL**

As the evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates, exceptions to economic determinism are not uncommon. Proponents of the structure-based theory of economic voting are aware of these systematic deviations and propose that differences in the clarity of responsibility can explain them. These scholars argue that voters only sanction officials when they believe the officials are responsible for national economic performance (e.g. Rudolph 2003; Beltran 2000, 2003). Voters may not reward positive economic performance, for instance, if they believe growth was caused by an international economic boom. Therefore, when voters are unable to assign credit or blame to elected officials for economic outcomes, electoral results will deviate from the predictions of the structural model.

The clarity of responsibility thesis assumes that voters can accurately calculate the degree to which candidates are responsible for past economic outcomes and then incorporate it into the voting calculus. In order to make the initial evaluation, Duch and Stevenson (2008) argue that citizens successfully solve a complex signal-extraction problem, pulling together the necessary facts from their information environment. Like

the campaign-centered argument developed in this study, the clarity of responsibility thesis is also based on the assumption that although economic voting in national elections might be pervasive, the strength of the economic vote is variable. Interestingly, early findings of variation in the economic vote were met with methodological skepticism among proponents of the structural model. The seeming instability was attributed to incomplete or incorrect empirical models (see Anderson, 2007). Yet the repeated finding of contextual variation (notably Paldam 1991) left the supposed methodological instability an empirical reality in search of a theoretical account. The “clarity of responsibility” hypothesis fills this void.

The central question, then, is what determines the clarity of responsibility? Research points, first, to the importance of formal institutional structure (Anderson 1995, Lewis-Beck 1988, Lewis-Beck & Mitchell 1993, Norpoth 2001, Paldam 1991, Powell & Whitten 1993, Rudolph 2003). Institutions allow elected officials to claim credit or avoid blame. When this occurs, the information stream is interrupted, responsibility becomes less clear, and voters may fail to sanction or reward incumbents even if they intend to. In countries where the executive is tasked formally with maintaining full employment, for instance, the incumbent party cannot evade its responsibility and is evaluated by voters on issues of job creation. By contrast, in countries where an independent central bank controls monetary policy, citizens recognize that elected officials deserve only a share of the praise or blame for national economic performance. In this case, the assumption is that deviations from economic determinism are more likely because voters will focus on non-economic issues. Integration into the global economy is another noted suppressant of the economic vote and presents an alternative explanation for the temporal clustering of errors noted in Table 1.2 (Duch and Stevenson 2008). For trade-dependent countries, a dip in domestic performance caused by a broader, international slowdown can hardly be

blamed on the ruling party. Thus, as international economic ties become stronger, the economic vote should be weaker and deviations from the structural model more common.

In addition to formal institutions, individual-level constraints also impact attribution of responsibility for national economic performance. Assigning credit or blame is not an easy task and citizens are often incorrect when making such attributions (Fischhoff 1976, Nisbett and Ross 1980). This may stem from a lack of voter sophistication (Gomez and Wilson 2006) or from partisan attribution bias (Rudolph 2003). In addition to being more likely to align their economic evaluations with their political predispositions (Anderson et al. 2004, Evans & Andersen 2006, Wlezien et al. 1997), partisans are also more likely to assign responsibility for good performance to the party they support and assign blame for bad performance to parties they do not support (Rudolph 2003; see also Peffley et al. 1987, Peffley and Williams 1985, Norpoth 1991). Because these biases do not cancel out in the aggregate (Bartels 1996, Duch et al. 2000) they systematically mitigate the level of economic voting.

Thus, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis implies that variation in the economic vote is caused by longstanding, national-level institutional arrangements and innate behavioral tendencies. Consequently, the errors of the conventional structural model of economic voting occur when these factors limit voters' ability to assign credit or blame for economic performance. Thus, the clarity of responsibility model assumes that the strength of the economic vote is invariant to the intensity of the economic message. Political agents and their efforts to alter the weights voters attach to economic variables are ineffectual (alternatively Grafström & Salmond 2010).

In terms of the four elections analyzed here, the implication is that neither the economy-vote link nor the final vote tally would have changed had the candidates pursued alternative messaging strategies. Al Gore would have lost in US 2000 had he

attempted to prime economic considerations; Felipe Calderón's sudden shift to the economic message in MX 2006 had no impact on his dramatic comeback victory; Vicente Fox would have ended the seven-decades-old rule of the PRI even if the campaign centered on issues of economic performance; and it never needed to be "the economy, stupid" for the relatively unknown Bill Clinton to unseat an incumbent who oversaw the end of the Cold War and the success of Desert Storm.

Although there is evidence that institutional factors are associated with the strength of the economic vote (notably: Duch & Stevenson 2008), there is no evidence that these factors account for the numerous deviations from the predictions of the structural model. I argue here that there are compelling reasons to believe that the clarity of responsibility thesis cannot provide the necessary leverage on these election outcomes. Most importantly, national-level clarity of responsibility scores (notably Powell and Whitten 1991) are nearly static within country. Duch and Stevenson (2008), for instance, score responsibility in all U.S. presidential elections since 1974 at the maximum value despite considerable variation in the economic vote from election to election. Thus, clarity of responsibility cannot account for all variation in economic voting. As a result, it also cannot account for the failures of the structural model.

From a theoretical perspective, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis is limited in two ways. First, the argument is predicated on the assumption that voters are fully rational utility maximizers. In terms of the process by which voters generate responsibility weights, the rationality assumption implies that voters have complete and accurate economic information, are capable of consistently and accurately solving complex signal extraction problems, seek out and obtain the necessary information to determine the degree to which the incumbent-party candidate is responsible for past

economic outcomes, and then adjust the weights assigned to economic variables in the voting calculus. These assumptions place an acute cognitive burden on voters.

Second, the clarity of responsibility thesis assumes that economic considerations are consistently salient in the minds of voters and that all voters hold candidates responsible for economic conditions. This implies that there is a “natural” level of economic voting that is quite high. Only when institutions or partisan biases interfere are economic considerations dampened. National economic performance, however, is not always the central focus of the voting public (e.g. Singer 2011). This is problematic because when salience is low election outcomes may not reflect economic context even if the clarity of responsibility is high.

Together, these empirical and theoretical limitations point to the inability of the clarity of responsibility thesis to explain deviations from economic determinism. While cross-national differences in clarity might account for cross-national differences in the mean level of economic voting, there is no accounting for important variation from election to election. In part, this is a consequence of the assumption that the economy is the top priority for voters in every election. While the clarity of responsibility thesis assumes that political campaigns have no influence on the economic vote, my agency-centered theory of economic voting suggests that variation in the salience of economic considerations is caused by exposure to economic campaign messages in particular.

## **BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

In addition to addressing outstanding questions in the vast economic voting literature, this project speaks to broader theoretical and normative debates in the social sciences. First, evaluating a priming-based theory of economic voting against the

conventional model speaks to the paradigmatic conflict over the importance of structural and institutional constraints versus the power of agency and individual choice. Structure-driven approaches leave no room for political leadership. In this view, standing executives attempting to drum up popular support are limited to the use of policy tools to effect real economic change. Come Election Day, candidates must bow to a structurally determined political fate. Structural factors account reasonably well for patterns of stable politics. But can they explain both “normal” patterns of political behavior and sudden deviations, or do political leaders intervene in ways that interrupt the normal pattern? My argument suggests that executives are more than passive observers of the political future. Instead, through political communication, political leaders wield substantial power to influence the criteria voters use to evaluate candidates. Thus, my research underscores the capacity of political elites to shape public support rhetorically. More broadly, it builds an understanding of the crucial importance of political agency in affecting political outcomes, even in the presence of powerful structural and institutional forces thought to hamstring them.

Second, this study advances the long-standing and contentious debate in the social sciences over the foundations of individual decision-making. Are individuals rational utility maximizers or are they subject to cognitive effects that violate the tenets of strict rationality? Do they gather and utilize complete information when making complex decisions or do they satisfice, relying on cues and shortcuts to minimize the cost of multidimensional decision tasks? In spite of decades of findings in psychology and economics about deviations from the postulates of rational choice theory (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1981), political scientists have been slow to integrate these findings into their own research (notable exceptions include Berejikian 1997; Druckman 2001; Levy 1994, 1997; McDermott 1998, 2004; Weyland 1996). This

is especially true in the study of economic voting, where the rationality-based Downsian model (Downs 1957) continues its 50-year reign (Quattrone & Tversky 1988 is a notable exception), and the study of comparative politics more broadly. As noted above, a number of observers document violations of the rationality-based model of economic voting. Yet, there have been few systematic attempts to develop a theory of economic voting that emphasizes the cognitive bases of individual behavior.<sup>16</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this project represents one of the first attempts to do so.

Finally, this study addresses an important normative question about the responsiveness of voters to the actions of political agents in modern democracies. Are citizens easily swayed by candidates' rhetorical efforts or can they resist and hold elected officials accountable for their objective performance? The study of economic voting has long been motivated by a concern for the quality of democracy.<sup>17</sup> The "Michigan school's" (Campbell et al 1960) conclusions about the overwhelming power of party identification as a predictor of political behavior raised fears that voters were incapable or unwilling to sanction or reward the government on the grounds of policy and performance. The often-observed correspondence between economic performance and incumbent electoral success, therefore, was seen as a clear counterexample. In defense of this last bastion of democratic accountability, a number of observers are resistant to the notion that the economic vote may itself be politically determined (van der Brug et al. 2008). If voters are pushed around by campaign messages in a way that drives a wedge between perceived performance and objective context, accountability may be undermined. Assessing the power and reach of political leadership, therefore, is

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<sup>16</sup>Ansolabahere (2006) is one exception.

<sup>17</sup>Anderson (2007) provides a thorough review of the normative foundations of the study of economic voting.

fundamental in developing our understanding of citizens' responsiveness or resistance to campaign appeals.

## **PLAN OF THE DISSERTATION**

This study combines quantitative analysis, content analysis, and extensive narrative accounts of political campaigns to develop a general argument about the conditioning influence of economic campaign messages on the economic vote and the specific dynamics of this influence in two presidential elections in both Mexico and the United States. I construct a campaign-centered model of economic voting that attempts to explain why incumbents often lose when the economy performs well and win when economic performance is poor. I develop a set of empirically testable hypotheses at both the individual and aggregate level and set these up as an alternative to the conventional structural model of economic voting. In order to test these competing arguments, I rely on four analytic strategies. First, I analyze four large sets of panel data to develop a metric for understanding the strength of the economic vote. I use these scores to track variation in the economic vote both within and across the four elections under study. Second, I assess the aggregate-level implications of my theory by comparing these patterns of variation against the intensity of economic campaign messages and economic news. To explore the covariation, I collect advertising frequency data and content analyze the economic message in televised campaign ads and printed national news in order to generate a measure of the intensity of the economic message. Third, where possible, I combine the intensity scores with the panel data to examine the impact of individual-level exposure to the economic message on the strength of the economic vote. Finally, I test the performance and the generalizability of my theory at both the national

and cross-national level to see if a campaign-centered model of economic voting can outperform the conventional structural and institutional models.

In the next chapter, I develop a campaign-centered model of economic voting. Combining insights from political psychology and political communication, I argue that economic campaign messages systematically condition the weight voters attach to economic variables when evaluating candidates for office. I develop individual level hypotheses that focus on variation in exposure to economic rhetoric; aggregate-level hypotheses that highlight the impact of the communications decisions candidates make over the course of the campaign; and derive hypotheses that focus on the dynamics of each campaign under study.

Chapters three through five test this model of economic voting in four presidential elections. In each chapter, I introduce the electoral context and present an evaluation of each candidate's communications strategy. I then assess the impact of economic campaign messages on the strength of the economic vote. Where data is available, I also test the effect of individual-level exposure to televised economic ads. Chapters three and four evaluate the capacity of campaign ads to prime the economic vote in the context of the "activating" cases: US 1992 and MX 2006. For US 1992, I pay special attention to the influence of Bill Clinton's indefatigable economic attack and George H.W. Bush's last-minute effort to distract from economic conditions with a sudden focus on "cultural" values. I also use this case as a means of developing an unconfounded method for measuring the strength of the economic vote. In MX 2006, I exploit Felipe Calderón's sudden economic transformation and the economic response of the challengers as a natural experiment. I explore whether this sea change in the campaign message primed the economic vote and whether it drove Calderón's surprising comeback.

Chapter five moves beyond “activating” elections and evaluates the capacity of campaigns to depress the economic vote in the context of two “deactivating” cases: MX 2000 and US 2000. For MX 2000, I focus on the surprising defeat of the PRI in the midst of three years of economic success. I pay special attention to Vicente Fox’s generic, but carefully crafted, message of democratic change and the impact it had on the other candidates’ communications strategies. I argue that this strategy completely eliminated a latent economic vote that existed at the beginning of the general campaign. I then consider Al Gore’s puzzling loss to George W. Bush despite the longest economic expansion in U.S. history. I contend that Gore’s repeated, though mysterious, decision to avoid the economic discussion kept economic consideration out of sight and out of mind.

Chapter six evaluates the generalizability of my priming approach beyond the four cases analyzed in the prior chapters. Here I consider whether economic campaign rhetoric explains variation in the economic vote in the activating 2007 South Korean presidential election and the deactivating 1972 West German Bundestag and 2006 Canadian parliamentary elections. I pay special attention to the West German case, in which the intense economic struggle that characterized the early campaign suddenly disappeared only a month before election day. An excellent comparison to MX 2006, I argue that this sudden shift completely obliterated the economic vote. I then compare the explanatory power of the argument developed here against the conventional model. Do campaign dynamics help make sense of the numerous violations of economic determinism? Can they also explain the cases that follow the conventional predictions?

Chapter seven concludes with a summary of the evidence and a discussion of the theoretical and empirical implications of the study. I consider what these results mean for the vast economic voting literature and the potential empirical benefits of incorporating explicitly political variables into economic voting models. I also draw on

the extensive campaign narratives and empirical results to address further the question of why candidates choose particular communication strategies and when we might expect them to choose strategies that do not simply follow the dictates of economic context. Finally, I address possible limitations of the study and suggest future avenues for the study of voting behavior and comparative politics.

## **Chapter 2: Intention or Accessibility? Towards a Priming-Based Theory of Economic Voting**

A top McCain adviser signaled last week that the campaign intends to "turn the page" from economic issues - which polls show have staked Obama to a significant lead - and ramp up attacks on Obama as an inexperienced ultraliberal. "It's a dangerous road, but we have no choice," a top McCain strategist told the Daily News. "If we keep talking about the economic crisis, we're going to lose."

– *New York Daily News*, October 5, 2008

Events, over which government may, or more likely may not, have control, shape the attitudes of voters to the advantage or disadvantage of the party in power. By the time the presidential campaign rolls around the die may have been cast.

– *V.O. Key Jr.*, 1966

Existing economic voting theory is insufficient as a model of both individual-level voting behavior and aggregate-level electoral outcomes, so this chapter proposes a more persuasive account by drawing on cognitive-psychological theories of decision-making. In particular, I build on priming theory (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1987) to formulate a new psychology of economic voting that highlights the power of economic campaign messages to condition the strength of the economic vote. Unlike the ideal-typical assumptions that motivate the conventional “thick” structuralist model, this psychological argument is built inductively on well-documented patterns of human behavior. Rather than assert that citizens are instrumentally rational actors who intend to behave as “economic voters” par excellence, priming theory provides a strong microfoundational basis for understanding why and to what extent voters turn to their economic opinions when casting a ballot. By reevaluating the psychology of economic voting in light of extensive research on priming, I also provide a systematic account of

the influence of campaign strategy on individual-level political behavior, which extant theory treats only in an ad hoc fashion. As a result, the priming approach provides more robust theoretical grounds for understanding the interactions between economic performance, political campaigns, and electoral outcomes than the conventional model.

Psychological theories of decision making necessarily elevate the power of individual action over structural and institutional factors. Despite this methodological individualism, however, the argument I develop in this chapter is not that economic structure has no influence on electoral outcomes. In fact, agent-centered theories provide few insights into human behavior without reference to the particular structural or institutional context in which decisions are made (Bates 1989; Lichbach 2003). Structure, in this view, shapes political outcomes indirectly because it creates both opportunities and constraints that candidates and citizens must confront. Yet “choice” is the ultimate determinant in the cognitive-psychological approach because agents act freely within structures rather than merely reflect them. In the case of economic voting, I argue that the economic and political context sets the stage for campaign choices, but independent agents develop their own strategies, which sometimes deviate from the predictions of a purely structural model. On the whole, then, the cognitive-psychological approach integrates structure and agency to provide a more comprehensive solution to the economic voting puzzle.

This chapter forwards a microfoundational theory of economic voting as an alternative to the conventional model. I begin by briefly unpacking the individual-level assumptions underlying the conventional model and outlining the implications for voters, candidates, and election outcomes. I then build on the theory of priming to develop a new psychology of economic voting that explains when and why voters are likely to evaluate governments based on past national economic performance. I take care to

explain what priming is and, most importantly, what it is not. I then turn to candidates for public office and the key role they play in directing voters' attention toward or away from economic issues, and the strategies they employ to these ends. I argue that candidates' decisions to emphasize or deemphasize economic issues in televised campaign ads systematically condition the strength of the economic vote. Finally, I derive a set of empirically testable hypotheses from these competing approaches that will guide the analyses in later chapters.

### **WHY GOOD CITIZENS MAKE FOR MINIMAL CAMPAIGN EFFECTS**

Extant economic voting theory posits that voters *intend* to cast an economic ballot. Though rarely made explicit, the conventional model is built deductively from the assumption that voters are instrumentally rational beings. They possess complete economic and political information, and they vote for the candidate that maximizes expected utility (Downs 1957). Why the economy should get top billing among the range of criteria one could use to evaluate candidates is not considered in detail. However, following Norpoth (1993), the argument is simply that economic voting is “hardwired into the brains of citizens.”

Precisely why rational individuals would cast an economic ballot (i.e. how it maximizes utility and how utility might be defined) is a matter of some debate. Proponents of the “sanctioning” model (e.g. Kramer 1971; Fair 1978) hold that retrospective, sociotropic economic voting is a rational strategy because it solves a moral hazard problem (Barro 1973; Ferejohn 1986). If voters do not punish poor economic performance, they may invite rent-seeking behavior from self-interested candidates. However, if voters regularly oust governments that fail to meet some threshold

performance level, reelection-minded candidates will not shirk their responsibilities in office. In contrast to this incumbent-centered, reward-punishment logic, the “selection” model (e.g. Stigler 1973; Alesina & Rosenthal 1995; Duch & Stevenson 2008) posits that voters cast an economic ballot in order to select the most competent economic steward. Voters do more than simply observe the state of the economy. They also evaluate the incumbent’s responsibility for economic performance, intuiting which fluctuations were related to government action and which were not (Stigler 1973). By solving this complex “signal extraction” problem, voters can use past economic performance to form rational expectations about candidates’ future performance in office.

Despite these differences, the basic assumption in both cases is that voters are “purposive agents who seek to assign credit or blame to incumbents [for their economic stewardship]” (Anderson 2000: 152). If voters fail to achieve this lofty ideal, as the evidence in Chapter 1 shows they often do, it is not seen as a challenge to the assumptions of rationality and intentionality. Instead, researchers argue that institutional or structural factors inhibited their ability to assess the incumbent’s responsibility for the state of the economy (e.g. Fearon 1999; Alcañiz & Hellwig 2011) or his competence as economic steward (e.g. Alesina & Rosenthal 1995; Duch & Stevenson 2008).<sup>18</sup> This helps explain why, as economic voting scholars have long understood, the predictive power of economic conditions on election outcomes varies significantly across countries (e.g. Lewis-Beck 1988, Paldam 1991), from election to election within countries (e.g. Anderson 2000, Duch & Stevenson 2008, Lin 1999), and within elections (e.g. Carey & Lebo 2006; Matthews & Johnston 2010).

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<sup>18</sup>Anderson (2007) provides a detailed review of this “contingency dilemma” and its proposed causes.

Crucially, political campaigns drive these structurally-determined outcomes by allowing voters to realize their desire to cast an economic ballot. Campaigns matter “*because they tend to produce congruence between fundamental political conditions [...] and vote intentions*” (Bartels 2006, p. 79-80). As election day nears and voters “tune in” to politics, the campaign reminds them about the state of the economy and enables them to align their vote choice with economic opinion (Gelman & King 1993; Stevenson & Vavreck 2000). Following this “enlightened preference” logic, campaigns necessarily amplify the strength of the economic vote (also: Anderson et al. 2005; Campbell 2000).

This effect, however, is not the result of the particular messaging strategies candidates employ throughout the campaign (e.g. Markus 1988; alternatively: Hellwig 2012). Gelman and King (1993: 420) make this point explicitly, writing that, “although presidential campaigns have an important effect, what is relevant is their *existence*.” Numerous studies echo the argument that campaigns drive voters towards the outcome that would be predicted by looking only at the economic and political conditions in which the contest is held (e.g. Bartels 1988; Finkel 1993; Holbrook 1996). The content of candidates’ ads and speeches are of little import. The prevailing economic winds would have blown voters to the same outcome had the candidates chosen different messaging strategies.

Thus, extant economic voting theory proposes that individual-level exposure to campaign stimuli conditions the strength of the economic vote. As the election draws near, exposure to the campaign in general increases and economic evaluations grow increasingly predictive of vote choice. Despite candidates’ extensive and expensive efforts, conventional economic voting theory holds that they are powerless to stem this inevitable rise in the strength of the economic vote. Come election day, instrumentally rational voters will take the government to task for its economic performance.

## A NEW PSYCHOLOGY OF ECONOMIC VOTING: THE PRIMING APPROACH

It is difficult to see how we can improve our understanding of how and why voters respond to national economic performance without first understanding how people think. In contrast to the ideal-typical assumptions of conventional economic voting theory, cognitive-psychological models of decision-making are built inductively on decades of experimental research on the cognitive processes that drive an individual to select a particular course of action. One of the central findings of this research is that humans routinely make complex decisions without consulting all relevant information stored in memory (e.g. Ajzen & Sexton, 1999; Fazio et al. 1985; Simon 1979). Instead, they mitigate the burden of complete information recall by sampling from only a select group of considerations and making decisions based on a review of this limited set. Whether a consideration comes to mind and how heavily it influences the final decision depends on the extent to which it is “primed” for access in memory. Criteria that are inaccessible will have no influence on the final decision.

Experimental and observational evidence of priming—a shift in the criteria individuals use to make decisions<sup>19</sup>— is substantial (e.g. Stoker 1993; Bartels 1997; Mutz 1998; Pollock 1994; Iyengar 1991).<sup>20</sup> Krosnick and Kinder (1990), for instance, find that the standards U.S. citizens used to evaluate Ronald Reagan changed dramatically after the November 25, 1986 revelation that his administration had diverted funds obtained from covert arms deals with Iran to the Nicaraguan Contras. As news coverage of the

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<sup>19</sup>There are numerous variants of “priming”—affective priming, semantic priming, racial priming etc.—of which issue priming is one. Although there have been a number of important studies on affective priming (see Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997) and racial priming (e.g. Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002), the campaigns and communications literatures typically focus on issue priming (e.g. Iyengar & Kinder 1987). Note that I use “priming” throughout the dissertation as shorthand for “issue priming.”

<sup>20</sup>Numerous studies also find that seemingly inconsequential differences in the presentation of information causes dramatic shifts in preference formation and choice behavior (notably: Tversky & Kahneman 1981; also Kahneman & Tversky 1979, 1984; Sniderman & Theriault 2004).

Iran-Contra scandal intensified, considerations of foreign affairs were primed as criteria for evaluating the president. Opinions of U.S. intervention in Central America increasingly determined overall opinions of Reagan's performance in office. Voters who supported intervention came to evaluate Reagan more favorably while those who opposed it grew more negative about the President's performance.<sup>21</sup>

These findings, and the findings of the broader priming literature, demonstrate that the considerations that come to mind when a voter evaluates elected officials are neither complete nor random. Instead, the weight attached to each criterion changes predictably over time in response to issue specific stimuli. The implications for the study of economic voting are substantial. Priming theory contends that voters' propensity to hold governments accountable for economic performance varies with the salience of economic considerations. Moreover, research shows that salience increases only with exposure to economic stimuli in particular, not political stimuli more generally as conventional economic voting theory assumes. More than just a matter of correctly specifying the mechanism that links economic retrospections and vote choice, priming suggests that candidates, by emphasizing or deemphasizing economic issues in public messages, can condition the strength of the economic vote.

In this section, I lay out the priming hypothesis, its theoretical antecedents, and the cognitive processes that motivate priming effects. The priming approach requires a full explanation here because it has received scant attention in comparative studies of political behavior, particularly outside of Western industrialized democracies (exceptions include Moreno 2009; Singer 2011). As such, some readers may be unfamiliar with the

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<sup>21</sup>Priming is an "assimilation" effect, though rare studies find evidence that a stimulus induces a contrast effect, or "negative priming" (Glaser & Banaji 1999; De Houwer et al. 1997).

priming hypothesis in general and how priming differs from effects like agenda setting, framing, and persuasion in particular.

### **The Foundations of Priming: Satisficing**

Why would individuals rely on only a subset of relevant information stored in memory when making a choice as important as their vote? Why would the composition of this subset vary across individuals and over time? Priming theory rejects the assumption that citizens are fully informed utility-maximizers, arguing instead that individuals possess neither the information necessary to make a fully informed decision nor the motivation to call forth all information stored in memory. Instead, priming builds from our empirically observed tendency as decision makers to satisfice. As Simon argues, “human thinking powers are very modest when compared with the complexities of the environments in which human beings live. Faced with complexity and uncertainty, lacking the wits to optimize, they must be content to satisfice—to find ‘good enough’ solutions to their problems and ‘good enough’ courses of action” (1979, 3; see also: Jones 2000; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Satisficing is a sort of coping mechanism individuals use to mitigate the burdens of decision-making. We simply cannot pay attention to everything; to do so would breed paralysis. Human attention, therefore, is highly selective. This is true both externally—in terms of the new information we gather—and internally—in terms of the dimensions we call forth when faced with a decision. As a consequence, the decisions we make tend to be organized around only a few considerations (Asch 1946). When evaluating presidential candidates, vote choices are based on a limited sample of issues and economic retrospections are not necessarily among those issues chosen.

The particular considerations drawn from memory and the weights individuals attach to each are not random. Instead, the brain samples only those issues that are momentarily accessible in the mind (Fischhoff et al. 1980). When asked to evaluate candidates for office, an individual draws a convenience sample based on how salient a consideration is at that moment (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). The influence of a particular consideration increases with its salience (e.g. Higgins & King 1981). The brain uses this shortcut to impose order in the process of sampling from amongst the considerations stored in memory. This allows individuals to reach political decisions quickly but systematically. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) explain, “what information is accessible for presidential evaluation is not a matter of circumstance. When political circumstances change, what comes to the citizen’s mind most readily will also change” (65). The expectation, therefore, is that an individual’s vote choice will reflect his economic opinion only to the extent that this opinion is salient. If economic opinions are not fresh in voters’ minds, the economy will have little bearing on the election outcome. Voters, therefore, do not intend necessarily to cast an economic ballot.

As an example, imagine a voter who is socially liberal but believes the nation’s economy has improved during a conservative administration. If economic considerations are salient and social issues like gay marriage are not, the voter will align his choice with his economic opinion and be more likely than usual to support the conservative incumbent. However, if the salience of gay marriage increases, the voter adjusts his vote choice to reflect his predisposition and backs the liberal challenger. These outcomes are directly at odds with existing theory and occur independent of the “clarity of

responsibility” for economic outcomes. What, then, is issue salience and why does it vary over time and across individuals?<sup>22</sup>

### **Salience and the Power of Economic Stimuli**

Psychologists and political scientists typically define salience in terms of “accessibility” in active, or short-term, memory.<sup>23</sup> Rather than paying the cognitive cost of surveying all stored considerations, satisficing individuals draw only on considerations that are already on the top of the mind (e.g. Zaller 1992).<sup>24</sup> The relative importance of each consideration drawn depends on the extent to which it is momentarily accessible (Higgins & King 1981; Iyengar & Kinder 1987).<sup>25</sup> As responsive, rather than purposive beings, the accessibility of economic opinions, for instance, depends on exposure<sup>26</sup> to explicitly economic stimuli, which force economic considerations into active memory.

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<sup>22</sup>Answering these questions is akin to specifying the “mediator” of economic priming. Specifying a mediating variable involves identifying the mechanism by which the proposed cause generates the outcome of interest (Baron and Kenny 1986). In this case, the salience mediator is what links exposure to economic stimuli to changes in the strength of the economic vote.

<sup>23</sup>Some scholars define salience in terms of issue importance (notably: Miller & Krosnick 2000, Miller 2007). The importance hypothesis posits that individuals sample only those issues that are deemed most important to the target evaluation. Accessibility is seen as a potentially necessary but insufficient cause of priming. The vast majority of evidence, however, supports the accessibility hypothesis.

<sup>24</sup>Fischhoff et al. (1980) find that “off the cuff” decisions rely more on “top of the mind” considerations than more exacting decisions. Whether vote preference is an exacting decision is unclear. However, Achen and Bartels (2004) find that voters often turn on governments when drought and shark attacks make the news, suggesting that vote preferences are not resistant to priming effects.

<sup>25</sup>Whether or not an issue is in active memory is not the only way to define accessibility, though it is the exclusive approach used in political science. Accessibility could also be defined in terms of the facilitation of mental pathways. A priming stimulus, in this instance, may not bring a consideration to the front of the mind, but instead readies the individual to respond to later evaluative tasks in a particular way (Hermans et al. 1996; Klauer 1998; Klinger et al. 2000). This is similar to the “implicit memory” approach to priming (e.g. Schacter 1987). Fazio (2001, 119-120) presents a brief review of this “response competition” or “facilitation” approach in psychology.

<sup>26</sup>Zaller (1992) distinguishes between “exposure” to messages and “reception” of messages, arguing that individuals who are more engaged with an issue cognitively are more likely to comprehend, or receive, messages on that issue. Priming, however, is an implicit memory effect and individuals exposed to an economic ad, for instance, should be primed regardless of their prior engagement with economic issues. Priming is “provoked by mere attention” (Kinder 1990, 365). As a result, I use the term “exposure” throughout to differentiate it from this understanding of reception.

Issue accessibility changes rapidly as individuals are exposed to new information in newspaper articles (e.g. Mutz, 1992), televised newscasts (e.g. Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), campaign advertisements (e.g. Gerber et al. 2011), or personal conversations. The more recent and frequent the exposure, the more accessible the consideration and the more influential it becomes in the choice calculus (e.g. Higgins et al. 1985; Srull & Wyer 1979). The size of accessible memory, however, is fixed and limited, and an increase in the salience of economic considerations necessarily displaces the accessibility of other considerations and vice versa (Oberauer & Kliegl 2006).

External stimuli drive accessibility because of a classic process known as automatic spread activation. Early experimental studies in psychology found that exposure to a given word facilitated the identification of associated concepts. Respondents identified “nurse” more quickly, for instance, when primed with “doctor” (e.g. Meyer & Schvaneveldt 1971; Neely 1976, 1977). This suggests that spread activation is an automatic process, which was later confirmed by studies using subliminal primes to enhance response times in decision making (e.g. Greenwald et al. 1989; Wittenbrink et al. 1997). Stimuli, therefore, spread automatically through the mind, activating associated constructs along the way (Fazio et al. 1986).

With respect to voting behavior, these findings suggest that exposure to news stories about offshore drilling, for instance, activates broader opinions about the state of environmental protection. Individuals primed with these stories are more likely to draw on their opinions about environmental issues when evaluating candidates than unprimed individuals. As individuals encounter non-environmental stimuli, however, the salience of environmental considerations fades.

Research consistently finds that automatic activation produces very little “issue spillover.” Instead, priming effects are targeted and issue specific (Iyengar & Kinder

1987; Krosnick & Brannon 1993; Krosnick & Kinder 1990). Stories about national defense affect the salience of beliefs about national defense and national defense alone. A conversation with a coworker about the rate of illiteracy, for instance, will increase the accessibility of education-related considerations but not opinions of U.S. involvement in the Middle East.

Although there is little spillover between issues, there is evidence that, within issue domains, specific stimuli prime more general considerations. For instance, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) find that exposure to news stories about President Jimmy Carter's overseeing of the Camp David Peace Accords did not prime considerations of his handling of the Iranian hostage crisis. Similarly, exposure to news stories about the hostage crisis failed to prime voters' opinions of Carter's performance at Camp David. However, exposure to either story primed voters to evaluate Carter based on their beliefs about his handling of foreign affairs more broadly. Krosnick and Kinder (1990) also show this same kind of "broadening" effect within an issue dimension. They find that the revelation of Iran-Contra scandal primed voters to evaluate President Ronald Reagan on their beliefs about U.S. involvement in Central America and their more general opinions of U.S. isolationism.<sup>27</sup>

Other studies reach similar conclusions about the broad effect of stimuli within an issue dimension. First, Krosnick and Kinder's results (also: Ladd 2007) demonstrate that performance-oriented stimuli can prime related issue positions. Second, Hart and Middleton (2012) show that the reverse is also true—exposure to stories about energy policy primed evaluations of President Barack Obama's handling of the environment (i.e. a performance evaluation). Finally, Hart and Middleton also find (although their

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<sup>27</sup> The effect on opinions of U.S. involvement in Central America is specific to "political novices."

experiment was not designed to test this explicitly), that prospectively-oriented stimuli prime retrospective performance evaluations. News stories about possible policy developments in the future affect the salience of beliefs about past performance.

These finding that priming effects are specific across issue dimensions but not constrained within them or by the temporal framing of the prime is crucial for the study of retrospective economic voting. They suggest that exposure to stimuli about rising prices, for instance, will prime broader evaluations of national economic performance rather than just considerations of inflation. Moreover, prospective economic stimuli ought to prime evaluations of past economic performance (even if they also prime prospective considerations). Economic stimuli, therefore, must be conceived of broadly and must include stories or ads about past economic performance, economic policy, and expectations of future economic performance.

Thus, the accessibility hypothesis predicts that economic stimuli, broadly defined, condition the strength of the retrospective economic vote. Exposure to explicitly economic messages—not political stimuli more generally—increases the ease with which voters retrieve economic considerations. This facilitating effect occurs automatically and increases the weight attached to economic considerations in the vote decision. By contrast, non-economic stimuli push economic considerations out of active memory, decreasing the weight attached to economic retrospections in the vote decision.

### **What Priming Is Not**

Having defined priming positively, I find it useful to differentiate it from persuasion, learning, framing, and agenda setting. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, these effects are distinct from priming. Highlighting these

differences serves to clarify further the priming effect and its importance in the study of economic voting.

In the classical sense, persuasion is the goal of rhetoric and entails “changing people’s attitudes [and behavior] through the spoken and written word” (McGuire 1973, p. 216). Narrowing the Aristotelian definition to focus solely on *logos* (the argument itself, rather than the character of the speaker, *ethos*, or emotional state of the audience, *pathos*), political scientists see persuasion as a direct effect of stimuli on a given attitude. In the case of economic voting, a candidate might try to persuade a pessimistic electorate that the economy is doing quite well. He might counter his opponent’s claims that growth rates are down by noting that manufacturing and housing starts are up and jobless claims down. If successful, voters exposed to his rhetorical appeal will adopt a more positive economic opinion. Persuasion, therefore, is concerned with the attitude itself after exposure to stimuli, not the weight of that attitude in the voting calculus. Precisely the opposite, priming focuses on the salience of the attitude after exposure to stimuli, not the attitude itself. This is an important distinction as persuasion might have a powerful effect on vote preferences if economic opinions are already salient. If not, persuasion may not influence behavioral outcomes at all.

“Learning” is about more than just where an individual stands on an issue. Instead, learning concerns the congruence between an individual’s issue position and the position adopted by a candidate. Voters often support candidates with whom they disagree on a variety of issues without knowing it (Fowler & Margolis 2011). Learning occurs when external stimuli, like a campaign ad, alerts them to a disagreement with their preferred candidate, or agreement with a disliked candidate. There is evidence that campaigns have this informational effect on voters (e.g. Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995; Brians & Wattenberg 1996; Lang and Lang 1966). Presumably, voters respond by

altering their vote choice (e.g. Alvarez 1997; alternatively: Lenz 2012). Like persuasion, but unlike priming, learning is not directly related to the salience of an issue or attitude.

Framing is perhaps the trickiest to distinguish from priming. In part, this is the result of a lack of clarity in the literature about how to define and delimit framing effects.<sup>28</sup> Chong and Druckman (2007b) note two common definitions. The first kind of framing effect, which they call equivalency framing, occurs when “logically equivalent (but not *transparently* equivalent) statements of a problem lead decision makers to choose different options” (Rabin 1998, 36; also: Tversky and Kahneman 1981; emphasis in original). The second kind of framing effect, which is more common to political science, occurs “when, in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker’s emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman 2001, 1042). Public support for government spending on the poor increases, for instance, when the spending is framed in terms of helping the poor get ahead rather than in terms of higher taxes (Sniderman and Theriault 1999).

Clearly, this blurs the line between priming and framing. Miller and Krosnick (1998, 25), however, counter by explaining that “framing and priming are substantively different effects—the former deals with how changes in the *content* of stories on a single issue affect attitudes toward a relevant public policy, the latter with how changes in the *number* of stories about an issue affect the ingredients of presidential performance evaluations” (emphasis in original).<sup>29</sup> They differ, therefore, in terms of the attitude

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<sup>28</sup>Note that I limit my focus to “frames in thought,” rather than frames in communication. A frame in thought, or individual frame refers “an individual’s cognitive understanding of a given situation” (Chong & Druckman 2007a, 101; also: Goffman 1974).

<sup>29</sup>In practice, the lines are often blurred. Framing studies often focus on the intensity of exposure to frames (Barker 2005) and priming studies focus on the content of a single story (e.g. Hart & Middleton 2012). Moreover, a number of framing studies argue that accessibility mediates the effect of a frame on the salience of relative criteria (e.g. Zaller 1992; Chong 1993).

object—position on a particular policy (framing) versus approval of a candidate (priming). Most importantly, a number of studies define framing as a conscious process governed by changes in belief importance (e.g. Nelson et al. 1997; Nelson & Kinder 1991; Nelson et al. 1998). Again, this is in stark contrast to priming, an unconscious effect governed by automatic accessibility.

Finally, agenda setting concerns how important an issue is to voters. Cohen (1963, 13) argues that the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (also: McCombs & Shaw 1972; Weaver et al. 1981). Like priming, scholars argue that automatic issue accessibility mediates the agenda setting effect (e.g. Price & Tewksbury 1997). As exposure to news stories or campaign ads increases, the voter comes to think of the economy as a pressing national issue. If elected officials pay attention to the issues on voters’ minds, agenda setting may influence elite policy decisions.

## **CANDIDATES’ STRATEGIES FOR INFLUENCING VOTERS**

If economic stimuli shape the strength of the economic vote, where do economic stimuli come from? What type of stimuli might voters see during a campaign? In this section I introduce the second piece of my campaign-centered theory of economic voting. Specifically, I turn from mass behavior to elite behavior, from the audience for economic stimuli to a central source of economic stimuli during any campaign: the candidates.

Candidates are aware of the folk wisdom of the economic voting thesis, that incumbents are victorious when times are good and challengers are triumphant when times are tough (Wood 2007). Yet, candidates need not be passive observers of a

structurally determined electoral fate. Candidates in democracies all over the world spend millions of dollars trying to define the terms of the election rhetorically (Riker 1986; 1996). Following the logic of the priming thesis over the determinism of the conventional models, modern media campaigns are often characterized as a battle over salience, not a confrontation over the issues (e.g. Budge 1993).

Currently, the battle over issue salience is waged primarily on television screens. Television advertising is the central source of political information during campaigns (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1996) and the primary source of campaign expenditures in U.S. national elections (Fritz & Morris 1992). As West (1997, 1) describes it, “elections have become a television game.” Ads do more than just influence voters directly. They also drive news cycles and influence other candidates. As a result, candidates hire strategists, producers, editors, and analysts who meticulously craft, test, and then purchase airtime for what they believe will be a winning message.

Campaigning, then, can be described as a series of strategic choices about what to say on television and how often to say it. Candidates who believe they stand to benefit from either highlighting or downplaying past economic conditions do so by making calculated decisions about the extent to which economic messages will be the focus of the campaign as a whole. For instance, when U.S. strategist Dick Morris advised Mexican presidential hopeful Felipe Calderón in 2006 that victory depended on winning economic issues, Calderón unleashed a tidal wave of economic ads. President George H.W. Bush immediately backed off of economic issues in the summer of 1992 when his new advisor James Baker assured him that economic performance would not recover in time to benefit his reelection bid. Finally, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada chose to activate economic themes in his 2002 bid for the Bolivian presidency at the behest of the American consulting firm Greenberg Carville Shrum.

Although extant economic voting theory assumes that choices like these about the issue content of campaign messages have little influence on the strength of the economic vote, priming theory predicts that the prevalence of economic voting in the electorate varies substantially and predictably based on the particular messaging strategies the candidates employ. Specifically, I argue that candidates employ two basic communications strategies to influence voters directly: deactivation (deemphasizing economic issues to weaken the economic vote) and activation (emphasizing economic issues to prime the economic vote). Given the choice between these strategies and the demonstrated effects of campaign stimuli on issue salience, I contend that candidates are not victims of economic context. Instead, they have the capacity, through political communication, to weaken or strengthen the economic vote. Most importantly, because shifts in the economic vote drive changes in voting behavior, I argue that candidate messaging strategy influences election outcomes in politically consequential, even electorally decisive, ways. As such, candidates can overcome disadvantageous structural conditions or capitalize on advantageous ones.

### **Strategy 1 – Deactivation**

I begin with the strategy I call deactivation: deemphasizing (i.e. not mentioning) economic issues in televised ads. A deactivating strategy aims to dampen the strength of the economic vote by shifting the public eye away from economic considerations. Candidates can use this strategy to distract from either good or bad national economic performance. Typically, one would assume that the candidate chooses this strategy because he believes that a strong economic vote is detrimental to his electoral prospects (i.e. an incumbent in poor economic times or challenger in boom times). Yet, choice need not follow economic context. For instance, a candidate might also hope to

deactivate the economic vote if he believes he stands to gain more by activating some set of non-economic issues.

In order to disassociate economic perceptions from vote preferences in the minds of the public, the candidate simply ignores the economy, muting the intensity of economic stimuli in televised ads to the extent possible. I define a deactivating ad as one that does not mention the economy as a primary or secondary issue. This might include ads that make mention of economic issues in passing. But wouldn't these prime the economic vote? It is unlikely. Recall that the salience of economic considerations decreases necessarily when the salience of non-economic issues increases. Even if an ad makes a quick mention of unemployment, for instance, the broader focus on education ought to prime considerations of education policy at the expense of the economic vote. This is an important point because it is unreasonable to think that a candidate could ever run a campaign without ever mentioning the economy or economic policy. A deactivating strategy, therefore, is characterized by the low intensity of economic messages relative to non-economic issues, not complete economic silence. Even if a candidate airs a few ads focused squarely on falling incomes, it ought not signal a wholesale departure from a broader strategy of deactivation.

The priming hypothesis predicts that exposure to deactivating messages should weaken the economic vote by elevating the salience of non-economic issues, forcing economic considerations out of active memory. As voters hear less and less about the national economy, the weight attached to economic considerations in the vote decision declines. Most importantly, this implies that voters with positive economic evaluations will become less likely to vote for the incumbent-party candidate and voters with negative evaluations less likely to vote against him. This should be true at the individual level and at the aggregate level.

Does it matter if candidates *intend* to weaken the economic vote by paying little attention to economic issues? As I mentioned, a candidate might ignore economic issues simply because she recognizes that she stands to gain more by priming environmental concerns, for instance. Similarly, a less attuned candidate may simply fail to recognize that he could benefit from priming the economy. Does this still constitute deactivation? This is an interesting dilemma, but, for my purposes, the candidate's intent is secondary to the content of the ad. It need not be the case that a candidate hopes to quash the economic vote. In all cases the candidate has made a choice about which issues to emphasize. The strategies employed in these different cases ought to look the same and have the same effect on voters, even if the intent is not identical.

### **Strategy 2 – Activation**

The second strategy was immortalized publicly in 1992 when James Carville posted “the economy, stupid!” on the wall of Bill Clinton’s “War Room.” Activation is the opposite of distraction. The aim is to strengthen the economic vote by focusing the public eye squarely on economic issues or economic performance. To this end, candidates must increase the intensity of campaign messages that highlight the economic context or broader economic themes, raising the salience of economic considerations and driving voters to reevaluate candidates based on their perceptions of recent economic performance.

If automatic accessibility determines the weight attached to economic considerations and priming effects are issue-specific, only ads that mention the economy or economic policy positions can prime the economic vote. However, because priming effects are not constrained within issue dimensions, economic ads as a particular category

of ads must be conceived of broadly. Economic ads can be retrospective or prospective. They can focus on the economy writ large or particular aspects of economic performance. Finally, I argue that ads focusing on economic policy must also be considered activating economic ads. The decision to include these ads as part of an activating strategy is important because candidates rarely speak at length about the state of the economy. As you will see in the following chapters, candidates often begin with retrospective, performance mentions of this sort, but they move quickly to their proscriptions for addressing the economy. Research on priming, however, implies that these ads should activate retrospective economic evaluations (even if they prime other types of economic considerations as well).

As with deactivation, it is unreasonable to assume that a candidate will focus monolithically on economic issues throughout the campaign. An activating campaign will certainly include non-economic ads. The key, however, is that the intensity of economic ads is high relative to the intensity of non-economic, or deactivating ads.

Clinton's indefatigable assault on George H.W. Bush's economic leadership in the 1992 presidential campaign is perhaps the most famous example of an activating campaign. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the success of Operation Desert Storm, it appeared that Bush was on his way to a second term. As the campaign began and both Clinton and Ross Perot unleashed their activating attacks, however, the vote was defined increasingly in terms of economic considerations at the expense of foreign policy considerations (e.g. Lenz 2012).

## **CAN CANDIDATES ALSO INFLUENCE THEIR OPPONENTS?**

Research on campaign advertising is generally voter-centric, focusing on the effect of ad exposure on a variety of attitudes, emotions, and behavior. In the case of economic priming, candidates wield power because they can communicate directly with citizens. I argue, however, that there is another audience for campaign ads: the other candidates in the race.

Campaigns are as much about dialogue (or trialogue) as monologue. The battle of the airwaves is “not a one-player game. Rather, it is a contest in which each candidate’s ads get assessed in light of what rival candidates are broadcasting” (West 1997, 20). Yet, as I have presented it so far, candidates operate in isolation from one another, or at least independent of one another. The candidate who disseminates her activating or deactivating messages more frequently than her opponents controls the economic vote (an imbalance which is independent of economic conditions). If, however, a candidate’s strategy is partly a response to his opponents’ strategies, a candidate may have the power to influence the economic vote indirectly by enabling or constraining his opponents’ messaging strategies (i.e. enabling or constraining his ability to prime the economic vote). Even knocking an opponent off of his desired message briefly may mean the difference between victory and defeat. A candidate hoping to distract from solid growth, for instance, need not deactivate the economic vote completely in order to be successful. After all, every instance in which an opponent is forced to address non-economic issues is a lost opportunity to prime the economic vote. I argue, therefore, that activating and deactivating ads have “heresthetical” value (Riker 1982) at the elite level. More than just conditioning the salience of economic considerations in voters’ minds, these strategies also aim to hamstring opposing candidates or to draw them into a fight they cannot win.

In the 1960 U.S. presidential election, for instance, John F. Kennedy displayed an uncanny ability to counter Richard Nixon's references to the strong Eisenhower economy (Vavreck 2009). At any mention of growth, Kennedy noted that growth in the U.S.S.R. was higher and segued quickly into a pointed attack against the Republicans for falling behind militarily (the "missile gap"). How can we be satisfied when our enemy is growing faster and we cannot defend ourselves? In this way, Kennedy tried to prevent Nixon from priming the economic vote by raising the costs of doing so. If Nixon wanted to activate, he had to fend off piercing accusations that he was weak on Communism, a cost that a Republican could not accept in the Cold War era. Nixon had to take up the fight on national security, but, realizing that any mention of the economy could invite attack, Nixon abandoned his activating message. This, stick-and-move strategy likely had little effect on the salience of economic issues in voters' minds, but it may have suppressed the economic vote nonetheless.

I argue in Chapter 5 that George W. Bush's similar deactivating strategy limited the gains Gore could make from activation. Rather than blacken Gore's eye for pursuing an activating strategy (as Kennedy did), Bush tried to turn the incredible prosperity of the Clinton years into the launching pad for his "compassionate conservative" agenda. His ads regularly opened with comments about the strength of the economy before noting, for instance, that we still have a "deficit in values." The point was not to hide from Clinton's economic success. Karl Rove, Bush's chief strategist knew that Gore could have bludgeoned them with "prosperity" had they ignored the economy. So they used the economy as a way to highlight Bush's strength: his warm personality. If Gore wanted to talk about the economy, he risked allowing Bush to sound compassionate and personable, rather than incompetent and conservative (which Gore hoped he would). Moreover, because Gore was never able to communicate his own reasons for running, activating the

economy would put Gore in an uncomfortable position of talking about his vision for the future.

Independent of imbalances in campaign effort, how might enterprising candidates constrain their opponents and capture the discourse? Unfortunately, I can offer no systematic answer. Why efforts like these were successful while many others were not is context-dependent. Even Riker (1986, ix) makes it clear that heresthetics is an art: “There is no set of scientific laws that can be more or less mechanically applied to generate successful strategies.” We can, however, learn from examples like these. Therefore, while I make no attempt to analyze empirically the effect of candidates’ attempts to influence one another, I pay special attention to their interactions in the descriptive narratives and the ways in which these influence subsequent communication strategy decisions.

## **EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

What are the implications of these competing theories? Here, I draw out the predictions of each approach with a focus on the impact of candidates’ messaging strategies on individual voters and aggregate-level election outcomes. As a point of reference, Table 2.1 provides an essential comparison of the conventional model and the priming-based model I developed in this chapter. Specifically, it highlights key differences in the assumptions each approach makes about the psychology of economic voting. It also draws out the implications of these disagreements for our expectations about the factors that condition the strength of the economic vote. These divergent predictions guide the empirical analyses presented in the empirical chapters.

At the center of the debate between economic voting theory and priming theory is a question about why economic voting should occur at all. The conventional model holds that voters, as good democratic citizens, intend to take governments to task for their stewardship of the economy. Campaigns facilitate this innate drive by alerting voters to

Table 2.1: Competing Theories of Economic Voting

	Conventional Model	My Priming-Based Model
<i>Why do citizens cast economic ballots?</i>	They intend to hold governments accountable	Economic considerations are accessible in memory
<i>What causes the activation of the economic vote?</i>	Electoral campaigns	Exposure to economic campaign ads
<i>What is the effect of exposure to campaign messages on the economic vote?</i>	Activation regardless of content	Contingent on content: Economic ads activate, Non-economic ads deactivate
<i>Can candidates manipulate the economic vote strategically?</i>	No	Yes

the upcoming election and to the state of the national economy. Campaigns, therefore, necessarily increase the extent to which voters evaluate candidates on economic lines. This is true regardless of the strategic decisions candidates make within the campaign. The economic context is “more important than the specific content or impact of the ads (or speeches or debates or editorials) themselves” (Bartels 2006, 80). Candidates, therefore, are hapless, helpless victims of the prevailing economic circumstances.

Priming theory, by contrast, holds that human beings simply do not behave this way. Voters are not purposive beings driven to evaluate candidates along economic lines. Instead, the weight voters attach to economic retrospections varies with the

accessibility of economic considerations. If voters haven't been thinking about the economy, they won't vote on the economy, and they don't come to think about the economy incidentally. Because of the psychological process known as automatic spread activation and its issue-specific effects, only exposure to explicitly economic stimuli will bring economic considerations to the top of the mind. Therefore, the effect of electoral campaigns on the strength of the economic vote is contingent upon the issue content of candidates' messages. By emphasizing or deemphasizing economic issues, priming holds that candidates can activate or deactivate the economic vote. If the effect of campaign communications on the relative salience of economic considerations is systematic, then campaign messages can change the incumbent party candidate's aggregate-level vote share. If these effects are widespread, it may allow candidates to defy the conventional wisdom, altering the economic vote in a way that propels incumbents to victory in down times and challengers in good times.

What do these differences mean for the seven national elections under study in this dissertation? Recall that I select these cases for their scores on the proposed moderating variable: the intensity of economic campaign ads. I chose three "activating" campaigns, in which the candidates focused primarily on economic issues. I also selected four "deactivating" cases, in which the candidates collectively said very little about the economy throughout the campaign. If conventional economic voting theory is correct, the strength of the economic vote should increase on average over the course of all seven elections. Even in the absence of exposure to economic campaign ads, exposure to the campaign more generally should drive voters to realize their desire to cast an economic ballot. Precisely the opposite, priming theory predicts a decrease, or no increase, in the strength of the economic vote over the course of the deactivating campaigns.

Both economic voting theory and priming theory expect to observe an increase in the strength of the economic vote in the activating elections. However, they do so for very different reasons. Isolating the effect of the campaign in general versus exposure to the economic message in particular requires leveraging individual-level differences in exposure to the message. If priming holds, voters who saw high numbers of economic ads will attach greater weight to economic considerations than voters who saw very few economic ads.

If priming is correct, shifts in economic strategy within campaigns like MX 2006 and WG 1972 ought to create a sharp change in the trajectory of the economic vote. If candidates suddenly adopt the activating strategy and economic issues are thrust to the fore of the debate, the economic vote should increase rapidly. If candidates suddenly turn away from the economic message, there should be a reversal in the upward trend of economic voting. The conventional model cannot explain intra-campaign shifts like these without reference to the content of candidates' messages.

Evaluating these differences within campaigns has important implications for our understanding of the pattern of election outcomes considered in Chapter 1. If voters turn inexorably to their economic opinions, and if candidates cannot shake them from this destiny, then the broad class of elections in which incumbents win despite poor economic performance or lose despite good economic performance are merely the inevitable errors of a probabilistic model. If, however, candidates wield the power to condition the strength of the economic vote, then many of these outcomes reflect the systematic influence of communication strategy. More than just a means of explaining unusual outcomes, priming theory also helps explain the widely observed tendency towards economic voting. In this way, priming accounts for both the normal pattern of politics and deviations from it.

## **WHY HAVE CAMPAIGNS BEEN IGNORED IN ECONOMIC VOTING?**

Before concluding, it is important to consider why the central findings from the vast literature on psychological priming have yet to be incorporated systematically into a theory of economic voting. The division between these fields is particularly surprising given that a number of findings in the priming literature hint at the theory developed here. Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) initial media priming experiments showed that news stories can prime opinions of inflation and unemployment as criteria of presidential approval. Mutz (1992) reaches the same conclusion based on exposure to newspaper stories on the economy.

Moving closer to bridging the gap between priming theory and economic voting theory, Vavreck (2009) argues that incumbent-party candidates win when they emphasize the economy in good times and de-emphasize the economy in bad times. Challengers win when they do the opposite. Although she shows that these aggregate-level predictions hold across U.S. elections, her evidence does not extend to individual voters (155).<sup>30</sup> Messages matter in her analysis but not because they prime the economic vote. Lastly, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) note the conflict between priming and the structural model of economic voting and conclude that the existing model "would be enhanced by incorporating the fundamental insight of priming" (219).

My sense is that two basic assumptions prevent economic voting scholars from taking this advice. The first is the assumption that at least one candidate will always attempt to prime the economic vote (e.g. Campbell 2000; Matthews and Johnston 2010).

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<sup>30</sup>Vavreck (2009) shows that incumbents who emphasize the economy in good times can reduce voters' uncertainty about candidates' policy positions. Yet she finds no evidence that the strength of the economic vote increases in elections in which candidates focus on economic issues. For a summary of her findings, see Tables 6.4 and 6.5 (pp. 156, 157).

Because at least one candidate stands to gain from doing so, voters will always be exposed to high levels of activating messages. As with the predictions of the enlightened preference model (Gelman & King 1993), this implies that the effect of the campaign on the economic vote is constant across elections, driving voters towards the predictions of the structural model. However, voters' exposure to the economic message is not always high. As I show throughout the dissertation, there are elections in which the economy is not given much attention by any candidate, either because it is unclear which candidate stands to gain from doing so or because the candidates simply choose to focus on other issues. The second is that scholars often think of the campaign holistically, as a one-shot event rather than a series of strategic decisions about what to say and how often. Thus, there is little reason to incorporate campaign dynamics into the analysis when the predictions would presumably mirror those of the more parsimonious structural model. Of course, candidates can change strategies and, as the analyses in later chapters show, often do.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I developed a campaign-centered model of economic voting as an alternative to the conventional structural model. Drawing on extensive research on psychological priming, I argued that the strength of the economic vote varies with exposure to explicitly economic stimuli, not campaign stimuli more generally. These messages make economic considerations salient in the minds of voters, increasing the likelihood that they reevaluate candidates along economic lines. Because televised campaign messages are the most important source of economic and non-economic stimuli in the context of a national election, I argue that candidates are not victims of economic

context. Instead, they have the power to condition the strength of the economic vote rhetorically. Although I make no attempt to predict a candidate's communication strategy, candidates have two options at their disposal: activation and deactivation. By using these strategies to alter issue salience, candidates wield much more power over the issues that define vote choices than previously believed, especially if they can influence their opponents' strategies. The choices candidates make about which issues to emphasize or deemphasize in televised ads can thus swing election outcomes.

### **Chapter 3: Do Economic Messages Activate the Economic Vote and How Would We Know? The 1992 U.S. Election**

You cannot be president of the United States if you don't have faith. Remember Lincoln, going to his knees in times of trial and the Civil War and all that stuff. You can't be. And we are blessed. So don't feel sorry for — don't cry for me, Argentina. Message: I care.

– *President George H.W. Bush at a New Hampshire Primary Speech, 1992*

1. Change vs. more of the same.
2. The economy, stupid
3. Don't forget health care.

– *Sign posted in the Clinton campaign headquarters by James Carville, 1992*

I begin my evaluation of a priming-based approach to economic voting with an analysis of the 1992 United States presidential election. In part, I choose this case as a starting point because of the near-folkloric status of the above memo, posted on the wall of then-candidate Bill Clinton's campaign headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas. "The economy, stupid," is arguably the most famous election-year mantra in history. In the last two decades, this saying and its innumerable variations have become common parlance among scholars, reporters, politicians, campaign strategists, pop-stars, and everyday citizens alike. Although "The economy, stupid" was not used as a slogan as such during the 1992 campaign, it is indicative of the nearly unrivaled centrality of economic themes in campaign dialogue from the nomination stages to Election Day.

Fascinatingly, this simple slogan has been cited anecdotally in support of each of the competing visions of the economic vote evaluated here. For some, "The economy, stupid" captures the inescapable logic of the conventional structural model. Candidates,

for better or worse, are hamstrung by economic circumstances. The saying, in this sense, is a reminder that voters would inevitably come to punish President George H.W. Bush for a stalled recovery from the 1991 recession. Holbrook (1996), for instance, argues that any message Clinton chose would have been as effective as his economic message and any message Bush chose would have been just as ineffective. Regardless of the message, a growing wave of economic discontent would have swept Clinton to victory.

In stark contrast, others reference “The economy, stupid” as evidence of a candidate’s power to prime the economic vote strategically. In order to benefit from auspicious economic circumstances, the campaign must actively and frequently remind voters about the state of the nation’s economy. In this sense, the slogan is a warning that the campaign cannot afford to deviate from its economic message. As Carville said of a winning general election strategy, “We need to mention work every fifteen seconds.” Taking this advice to heart, the Clinton campaign unleashed a seemingly endless barrage of economic messages. Independent candidate and Texas billionaire Ross Perot, and even President Bush at times, followed suit.

To what extent, if any, did this flood of economic campaign messages into America’s living rooms activate the economic vote? Would voters have taken President Bush to task for his economic stewardship had the candidates said nothing of the nation’s recession as conventional economic voting theory predicts? Most importantly, how would we know?

My ultimate aim in this study is to answer questions like these empirically. Unfortunately, isolating the effect of economic campaign messages versus the effect of the campaign more generally turns out to be a difficult task and one for which conventional tests are ill equipped. This is true even in US 1992 where voters’ exposure to the economic message was unequivocally high. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to

document the numerous pitfalls that plague existing analyses of economic priming in the context of what may be the quintessential case of economic voting. Along the way, I use these missteps to develop the method I employ throughout this dissertation to evaluate the conditioning influence of economic campaign messages on the strength of the economic vote. The evidence presented here suggests that exposure to economic campaign messages in particular increased the likelihood that voters evaluated President Bush along economic lines. Unfortunately, problems of data availability and lurking confounds limit my capacity to make strong inferences about the effect of the economic message. The persistence of these problems in a case where the causal story seems so straightforward serves again to highlight the difficulties of adjudicating between my priming-based approach to economic voting and the conventional structural model.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. The first documents the candidates' economic communication strategies during the campaign and presents original content analysis of televised campaign ads. In the second section I construct a method for measuring the strength of the economic vote and the extent to which it varies over time. Here I demonstrate the insufficiency of the conventional method for identifying campaign priming and then develop a method for analyzing panel data that provides unbiased estimates of the economic priming effect. Using this method, I show that voters were indeed primed to evaluate the candidates along economic dimensions. The third section attempts to isolate the cause of this activation. Here I use available advertising data to show that the strength of the economic vote likely increased with exposure to economic campaign messages and not campaign messages more generally. Finally, I attempt to rule out media coverage of the economy as a possible confounding variable.

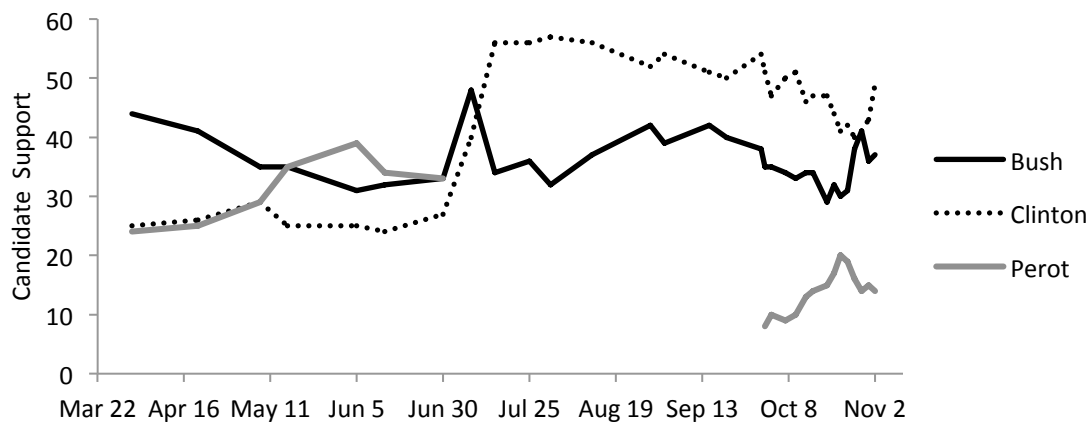
## **THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE MISSING ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

President Bush aptly described the 1992 presidential campaign as “weird.” Although he offered this assessment before the parties had even held their national conventions, the campaign from beginning to end was indeed unusual. In the summer of 1991, the election looked to be a mere formality on the road to four more years of Republican rule in the White House. The unequivocal success of American-led coalition forces in Operation Desert Storm, the recent conclusion of the Cold War, and the prolonged death throes of the Soviet Union left the President with an approval rating above 90% and an aura of invincibility that kept high-profile Democrats out of the race.

Over the course of the next year, however, Bush faced a surprise primary challenge from conservative speechwriter Pat Buchanan, and, as the tracking polls in Figure 3.1 document, he found himself trailing in the polls to a third-party challenger who campaigned mostly on television talk shows. Perot, the impulsive frontrunner, then mysteriously dropped out of the race only to rejoin the battle in October with accusations about the Bush team’s efforts to sabotage his daughter’s wedding. At the same time, America was witnessing the comeback of a Democratic nominee who shed his “Slick Willy” image as the calculating philanderer and transformed into “the man from Hope,” the empathetic Southerner who would put America back to work.

Throughout it all the country remained mired in a prolonged economic malaise that began with the stock market crash of 1987 and culminated with an eight-month recession that lasted through the spring of 1991. Although the economy began expanding at this point, growth remained inexplicably anemic. Bush’s apparent unwillingness to bolster the recovery and inability to relate to those who had fallen on tough times may have contributed to fears of a double dip recession and ire against the sitting incumbent. By the time these concerns subsided, it was too late for George Bush.

Figure 3.1: The 1992 Race for the Presidency



Note: Data come from Gallup's presidential "trial heats," based on registered voters. The gap in the dashed line corresponds to Perot's withdrawal from the race and eventual reentry.

In the end, Clinton won handily, earning more than twice as many Electoral College votes as Bush.<sup>31</sup> He became only the second Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson, and his victory marked only the second unseating of a Republican incumbent since Franklin D. Roosevelt's crushing defeat of Herbert Hoover in 1932. Ross Perot never recovered after his hiatus from the race. He did, however, win almost 20% of the popular vote despite not winning any Electoral College votes. Perot received a larger share of the popular vote than any third-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.

In order to gauge the effect of the economic downturn on voters' evaluations of the candidates and the extent to which this was conditioned by exposure to economic campaign messages, the first task is to document the intensity of the economic message. To this end, this section presents a descriptive account of the candidates' communications strategies during the 1992 campaign with an emphasis on their handling of economic

<sup>31</sup>Despite the sizable margin in the Electoral College, Clinton's share of the popular vote was far less than 50% and surpassed Bush's total by just 5.5%.

themes. I then complement the descriptive analysis with original content analysis of the economic message in televised campaign ads.

### **Uncertain Strategy in an Uncertain Context**

In the spring of 1991, the outcome of the presidential election more than a year away seemed to be in little doubt. As the impressive and highly televised military actions in Iraq wound down, President Bush's approval ratings were at an all-time high. Although the economy had fallen into recession, the expectation at the time was that it would be shallow and short. Experts suggested that economic growth would approach a very healthy rate of 4% well before voters went to the ballot box in November of 1992. These predictions, however, proved to be overly optimistic. The President's approval ratings slipped quickly through the fall of 1991 as the burst of recovery in the late spring stalled completely over the summer.

Consulting his advisors about how to quell growing economic fears in a group of tense meetings, Bush received conflicting recommendations (Rosenbaum 1991a). The most conservative elements of his staff, including Vice President Dan Quayle, insisted the President make an immediate and public push to cut the capital gains tax (Rosenthal 1991b). Even if he lost the ensuing battle with Congress, a bold move would show the public that he was engaged. By contrast, his advisors argued that he should sit tight and not risk losing a public fight with the Democratically-controlled Congress. The economy would shake itself out of its funk in short order, and the President would roll into the campaign in a strong electoral position.

Much to the chagrin of an increasingly concerned public, Bush chose the second path. The growing sentiment of discontent materialized on December 10, 1991 when conservative speechwriter and columnist Pat Buchanan declared that he would challenge

President Bush for the Republican nomination. He criticized the president's apparent indecision and inaction in the face of economic crisis and vociferously attacked Bush for breaking his infamous 1988 promise not to raise taxes. Although the president's team was not concerned that Buchanan would threaten Bush for the nomination, the need for public action became clear. On December 3, Bush's chief of staff, John Sununu, resigned under pressure because of his inability to get domestic affairs in order (Rosenthal 1991a). This signaled that the president would get serious about the economy and, for the first time, not wait for the economy to correct itself (Rosenbaum 1991c; Wines 1991). Sacrificing Sununu might also take some of the venom out of Buchanan's conservative attack. After all, Sununu had helped to orchestrate Bush's almost clandestine decision in 1990 to compromise with Congressional Democrats and raise taxes.

This uncertain context set the stage for the campaign and President Bush was forced to decide how to address economic issues and how often. Interestingly, Bush spoke regularly about the economy. In an ad aired before the New Hampshire primary, he apologized to voters for allowing the economy to slip into a "free fall." Although this is surprising in hindsight, the President still believed the economy would turn to his favor before Election Day. It made sense then, to address the economy and sympathize with those who had fallen on hard times. When things turned around, a salient economy would help Bush cruise to an easy victory. At a press conference in June 1992, Bush expressed his continued economic optimism. He opined that "Come fall, when we're out there taking our case to the people, with an improved economy behind us, I still feel confident about the outcome of the political election."

He maintained this strategy until the July 1992 jobs report made it clear the economy would not help him out come November (Wines 1992a). Although the campaign insisted that the economy would still be the major focus of the campaign, they

would begin to emphasize issues like “family values” and crime. This new approach took center stage at the Republican National Convention where Pat Buchanan delivered his famous “culture war” speech in prime time. Echoing the growing influence of the “religious right,” the conservative firebrand argued that the election was part of an ongoing “religious war... for the soul of America.”

Shortly after the convention, Bush announced that Secretary of State James A. Baker would be taking over as his chief of staff, relieving the beleaguered Samuel Skinner. This was a repeat of the scenario that played out in 1988, when Bush asked then-Treasury Secretary Baker to take over his campaign. Baker helped orchestrate an incredible comeback victory over Michael Dukakis by attacking Dukakis as an unqualified, weak coddler of criminals. The strategy in 1992 was almost identical. Baker insisted that the campaign distract from economic issues. One Bush aide summed up the new strategy as one that would “shun major policy initiatives [...], concentrating instead on a relentless effort to cast Mr. Bush as a better-prepared, more capable and more trustworthy leader than his Democratic challenger” (Wines 1992b). The campaign turned on Clinton as “Wrong for you, wrong for America” and painted the President as the elder statesman who was so successful as the “Commander in Chief.” This new tactic of diverting attention from the economy carried the President’s campaign through Election Day.

### **The “Man from Hope” and the Texas Billionaire**

Bill Clinton began the 1992 Democratic primary battle as a relative unknown in the eye of the public. Yet, the five-term Arkansas Governor used the relationships he forged as an active member of the National Governors’ Association to build the strongest, broadest, and best funded campaign organization of any Democratic candidate. Clinton

then leveraged his extensive network to build notoriety around the country and spread his economic message. He headed into the February primary in New Hampshire as a heavy favorite over former Massachusetts Senator and cancer survivor Paul Tsongas.<sup>32</sup> The campaign entered panic mode, however, as accusations emerged that Clinton had dodged the Vietnam draft and carried on a prolonged extramarital affair with former night club singer Gennifer Flowers. Clinton lost almost 20 points in New Hampshire in a week. Amazingly, the aggressive response to the emerging scandals from his newly-dubbed “war room” helped Clinton survive the initial onslaught and finish in second.

His resilience in the face of impending doom turned his defeat in New Hampshire into an impressive “comeback” showing. He then quickly outspent and out-organized his opponents en route to his party’s nomination. Clinton, however, remained badly bloodied by the scandals. In the late spring of 1992, he trailed both Bush and Perot in the polls by sizable margins. In response to ongoing concerns about his character flaws, however, Clinton redoubled his focus on the issues, namely his plan as a “New Democrat” to put Americans back to work.

These efforts paid off in full at the Democratic National Convention in July, which put the economy front and center. Even Clinton’s video biography, which was received exceptionally well by a prime-time audience, had an economic purpose. The “man from Hope” could sympathize with the economic plight of the average American because he had worked his way up from humble beginnings. He knew what it would take to turn things around. This reintroduction to Bill Clinton could not have come at a more fortuitous time as Ross Perot had mysteriously suspended his presidential campaign the day before Clinton gave his acceptance speech. The success of the convention and

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<sup>32</sup>The Iowa caucus is often thought of as the first important race in any primary. However, Iowa Senator Tom Harkin won his home state’s contest as easily as one would expect. The New Hampshire primary, therefore, was the first truly competitive contest in the 1992 campaign.

Perot's exit translated to an unprecedented twenty-point bounce in the polls. Clinton went from third to first and never relinquished his lead. Nor did he back off of his focus on the economy, especially jobs. His attack on Bush and "trickle down" economics was unceasing, even in the face of the persistent assault on his character.

Much like Pat Buchanan and former California governor Jerry Brown, Ross Perot entered the race as the manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the status quo. The Texas billionaire never officially announced his candidacy. Instead, Perot offered to run during an appearance on Larry King Live on the condition that volunteers around the country collect the signatures needed to make it onto the ballot in all fifty states. Unorthodox to the core, Perot captured America's imagination. He used his quick wit and plain speech to rail against deficit spending, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and gridlock in Congress. Rejecting conventional paid media outlets, he sold his candidacy largely through interviews on television talk shows and morning news programs. Channeling popular frustration, Perot held the lead by May.

The campaign began to stall, however, as the media became increasingly critical of the mercurial candidate and began to press Perot for specifics about his policy positions. At the same time, his television appearances became less frequent and he chose not to make up for his absence with a paid media campaign. After a series of embarrassing gaffes at public speeches—which he was not fond of giving—and increasing pressure from the Bush campaign, the improbable front-runner suddenly announced he was dropping out of the race. It was not until his return in early October that Perot revealed his motivations. Among other things, he claimed that operatives of the Bush campaign had plotted to ruin his daughter's wedding lest he end his campaign. This second stage of the campaign was somewhat more traditional. Perot eventually aired several conventional campaign ads. He also recorded and aired several thirty-

minute infomercials in which Perot, armed only with his flip cards and pie charts, laid out his economic vision for America. Despite his efforts, Perot never recovered in the polls.

### Coding the Economic Campaign Message

In order to complement this descriptive account with an empirical assessment of the intensity of the economic message, I conducted an original content analysis of all candidate-sponsored presidential campaign advertisements. I limit the analysis to spots televised by the major candidates. I also exclude ads sponsored by interest groups or the political party (not the candidate). In total, I collected 118 television spots from the 1992 election. I coded each ad for any spoken mention of the economy. No visual elements—including written words—were coded. I then weighted each spot by the centrality of the economic message to differentiate ads that only mentioned the economy in passing, or not at all, from those which featured economic themes in a primary role. The results are presented in Table 3.1. Further details about the method of content coding, which I use throughout the dissertation, are given in the Appendix.

Table 3.1: Economic Content in Televised Campaign Ads

<b>Importance of Economic Themes</b>	<u>George H.W.Bush</u>		<u>Bill Clinton</u>		<u>Ross Perot</u>
	Primary	General	Primary	General	General
<i>Primary theme</i>	36.4%	35.3%	57.1%	65.2%	50.0%
<i>Secondary/Tertiary theme</i>	45.5%	23.5%	35.7%	17.4%	20.0%
<i>Unimportant/No Mention</i>	19.1%	41.2%	7.1%	17.4%	30.0%
<b>Overall Focus on Economy:</b>	<b>70.5%</b>	<b>51.5%</b>	<b>80.4%</b>	<b>78.3%</b>	<b>62.5%</b>

The results reinforce the descriptive analysis. Bush's shift away from the economic message under Baker's tutelage is immediately evident. Although he aired a

similar number of ads focusing squarely on the economy, the number of ads with no economic mention more than doubled. It also appears that Carville's advice about mentioning work every fifteen seconds was taken almost literally. The intensity of Perot's televised economic message is perhaps lower than expected. Recall, however, that Perot did little advertising through paid media outlets. In fact, he reportedly "flipped out" early in the campaign when Hal Riney, the adman who produced the famous "Morning in America" ad for Ronald Reagan's 1984 reelection bid, told him how much it would cost to produce and air the necessary ads (Kolbert 1992). Although Perot changed his tune after his return to the campaign in October, his ads were aimed at filling in the gaps (i.e. presenting his stances on health care), rather than reiterating his earlier critiques of trickle-down economics and the national debt.

Lastly, Clinton's indefatigable economic attack is clear in both the primary and general election. His overall focus on the economy is substantially higher than either of his competitor's, particularly in the home stretch of the general campaign. Although I do not display the results of the other nominees, only Paul Tsongas (73.3%) comes close to the intensity of the Clinton economic message. By contrast, Jerry Brown devoted only about one third of his message to economic issues.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTIFYING ECONOMIC ACTIVATION**

To what extent did this flood of economic campaign messages into America's living rooms activate the economic vote? In this section I take the first step toward answering this question by assessing the extent to which voters, over the course of the campaign, came to evaluate President Bush on his handling of the national economy. (Whether or not this effect can be attributed to individual-level exposure to the economic

campaign message is taken up in the next section.) Although identifying economic priming may seem like a straightforward task, it is an endeavor replete with pitfalls. In fact, they plague nearly all prior analyses of economic voting (e.g. Mathews and Johnston 2010, Johnston et al. 2004).<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, these obstacles can be overcome.

In this section I begin by presenting a conventional test of economic priming in the 1992 campaign. After demonstrating the insufficiency of this method, I then follow Lenz's (2012) corrective method for isolating priming effects using panel data, and I use this approach to generate unconfounded estimates of the strength of the economic vote and its variation over time. I provide detailed discussions of these methods in part because they are vital to answering the substantive questions that motivate this project. Moreover, clarifying the limitations of prior analyses will help explain why the results obtained here are preferable. Note also that the reader will encounter the notation and statistical reasoning developed here from chapter to chapter, so it is important to become familiar with it now. Detailed information about the construction and coding of variables used in the estimation of these models are also provided in the Appendix.

### **The Conventional Test**

The economic vote cannot be observed or measured directly by a researcher. Instead, like any "issue weight," the importance of the economy in the voting calculus must be estimated statistically. Conventionally, the strength of the economic vote is evaluated by the degree of association between voters' economic retrospections and vote intentions. The more these two sets of responses line up, the stronger the economic vote

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<sup>33</sup>It is important to note here that I differentiate campaign priming from other types of priming, notably racial priming and media priming. Even in these fields however, only a handful of studies avoid these same pitfalls (e.g. Hart and Middleton 2012; Mendelberg 2001; Banks and Valentino 2012).

must have been at that time. If this alignment strengthens over time, the researcher infers that the economic vote was primed (e.g. Matthews and Johnston 2010).

In order to estimate the issue weight attached to economic perceptions prior to the outset of the campaign and the onslaught of Clinton and Perot's economic messages (akin to a "pre-treatment" estimate), researchers begin with the basic model:

$$(3.1) \quad y_t = \alpha_t + b_t x_t + u_t$$

where  $y_t$  represents vote choice at time  $t$  (i.e. between Bush and Clinton, between Bush, Clinton and Perot, or as overall Bush approval);  $\alpha_t$  is a constant;  $x_t$  is a voter's evaluation of national economic performance in the past year;  $b_t$  represents how well economic perceptions predict vote choice; and  $u_t$  is an error term with mean zero. For the sake of simplicity, I omit the  $i$  subscripts and any control variables (which I introduce later).

Given the functional form of this model, the conventional measure of the economic vote ( $\phi_t$ ) equals the marginal effect of economic retrospections on vote choice. This ensures that the substantive interpretation of the estimated effect is as similar as possible across different specifications of the outcome measure. If we assume a linear model where  $y_t$  is a continuous measure of Bush approval, the conventional, pre-campaign measure of the economic vote is defined as:

$$(3.2) \quad \phi_t = \frac{\partial y_t}{\partial x_t} = b_t$$

The ordinary least squares (OLS) estimate of this quantity represents the predicted change in Bush approval from a 1-unit improvement in voters' perceptions of the national

economy. Substantively, it represents the association between voters' economic retrospections and their approval of Bush prior to the outset of the campaign.

The “post-treatment” measure of economic voting (i.e. after the challengers inundated the airwaves with economic messages) is estimated as above. The researcher assumes the equation:

$$(3.3) \quad y_{t+1} = \alpha_{t+1} + b_{t+1}x_{t+1} + u_{t+1}$$

where all terms are defined as above, but the variables are measured at time  $t+1$ . Given this specification, the conventional measure of the post-treatment economic vote ( $\phi_{t+1}$ ) is defined as:

$$(3.4) \quad \phi_{t+1} = \frac{\partial y_{t+1}}{\partial x_{t+1}} = b_{t+1}$$

The OLS estimate of this quantity represents the association between Bush approval and evaluations of the national economy after the presidential campaign raised the salience of economic issues.

To test for economic priming, the conventional method is to evaluate whether the economic vote increased during the campaign:

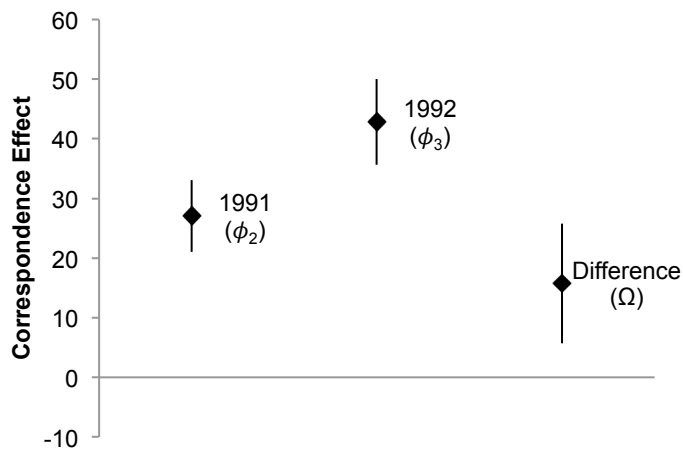
$$(3.5) \quad \Omega = \phi_{t+1} - \phi_t$$

If  $\Omega$  is greater than zero, it is assumed that economic retrospections became more predictive of Bush approval as the salience of economic issues in the campaign increased. Conventionally, this is taken as evidence that the economic vote was primed.

Given this setup, Figure 3.2 presents the results of a conventional test of economic voting in the 1992 presidential election. This figure shows the estimated

strength of the economic vote in the fall of 1991—before the campaign raised the salience of economic issues—and then again in the fall of 1992—when economic messages were central to the campaign—as well as the difference between them. The black lines represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. The point estimates are subscripted 2 and 3 because the data used to generate this plot come from the second and third waves of the 1990 – 91 – 92 ANES Panel Study.

Figure 3.2: Conventional Test of Economic Priming, 1992



These estimates suggest that the strength of the economic vote increased significantly between the outset of the campaign and its conclusion. In 1991, when the public eye was fixed primarily on the Gulf War, a change in a voter’s evaluation of the economy’s recent performance from “much worse” to “much better” corresponds to an 27-point increase in “feeling thermometer” ratings of Bush.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, after “the

<sup>34</sup>The substantive results are unchanged if I use Bush approval as the dependent variable. The thermometer rating actually generates smaller estimates of the economic priming effect. However, the derivation of marginal effects from OLS estimates is less mathematically involved than for ordered logit estimates. Note that because the survey was conducted in 1991, there were no questions about vote choice.

economy, stupid” came to dominate the campaign, this same change in opinion corresponds to about a 43-point improvement in feelings towards Bush.

These conventional estimates imply that economic opinion became increasingly predictive of evaluations of President Bush as the economic message intensified. Specifically, the apparent priming effect ( $\Omega$ ) equals the 16-point increase in the economic vote from 1991 to 1992. Because the confidence interval around this estimate does not cross the vertical axis, it is highly unlikely that the spike was observed purely by chance.

Column 1 of Table 3.2 presents the OLS estimates of Equations 3.1 and 3.3 used to generate the figures. I estimate the equations jointly by stacking the 1991 and 1992 responses, including an indicator variable for the 1992 survey (*POST*), and interacting the independent variables with the indicator. Note that the economic vote in 1992 is not estimated directly in this setup, but can be backed out of the estimates easily ( $27.06 + 15.77 = 42.83$ ).

For the sake of fidelity with the equations derived here, the model in Column 1 excludes any control variables (e.g. political ideology or family income). Doing so also minimizes concerns that the estimate of the economic vote is driven by the particular control variables included in the model. However, leaving these controls out of the model raises concerns that economic retrospections are serving as a proxy for some omitted variable. To quell this fear, Column 2 presents estimates of a model that controls for a respondent’s party identification, political ideology, gender, educational attainment, household income, and opinions about abortion and the death penalty (details on variable construction and coding are presented in the Appendix). Although estimates of the economic vote and the degree of economic priming are much smaller in this “fully-specified” model, they remain highly significant. The substantive interpretation of the results, therefore, is unchanged. As a general note, I will present estimates of both a

“sparsely-specified” model and a fully-specified model throughout the dissertation in order to reassure the reader of the veracity of the findings.

Table 3.2: Conventional Estimates of Economic Priming (1992)

DV = Bush Feeling Thermometer	(1)	(2)
<i>Post Indicator</i> ( $\alpha_{t+1} - \alpha_t$ )	-20.91*** (1.79)	-20.51*** (6.03)
<i>Economy</i> ( $b_2 = \phi_2$ )	27.06*** (3.67)	17.86*** (3.24)
<i>Economy*Post</i> ( $\Omega$ )	15.77*** (5.14)	9.54** (4.64)
<i>Democrat</i>		-3.64 (2.75)
<i>Democrat*Post</i>		-0.12 (3.67)
<i>Republican</i>		11.23*** (2.77)
<i>Republican*Post</i>		6.73* (3.76)
<i>Ideology</i>		10.49*** (2.84)
<i>Ideology*Post</i>		10.70** (4.28)
<i>Female</i>		1.11 (1.42)
<i>Female*Post</i>		3.85* (2.02)
<i>Education</i>		-7.75*** (2.83)
<i>Education*Post</i>		2.19 (3.99)
<i>Income</i>		9.02*** (3.00)
<i>Income*Post</i>		-8.64** (4.25)
<i>Abortion</i>		-9.44*** (2.82)
<i>Abortion*Post</i>		-2.67 (3.98)
<i>Death Penalty</i>		9.23*** (2.07)
<i>Death Penalty*Post</i>		-4.27 (2.92)
<i>Constant</i> ( $\alpha_i$ )	62.51*** (1.36)	52.58*** (4.34)
<i>R-squared</i>	0.354	0.413

Note: N=901. Figures are OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. For the statistical models, all independent variables are coded from 0 to 1. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

## **The Problem of Observational Equivalence**

More than 150 published studies rely on this method, or some variant of it, to make inferences about the presence of priming effects, including economic priming (Lenz 2012). In the present case, the results reveal that the association between economic opinion and Bush approval became significantly stronger from the beginning of the 1992 campaign to the end. This implies that the economic vote was indeed primed. That is, voters, whether because of exposure to economic campaign ads, the campaign in general, or some other factor, changed their evaluation of President Bush to reflect their opinion of the nation's past economic performance.

The problem, however, is that these results are also consistent with an alternative explanation. Consider the possibility that, instead of changing their evaluation of Bush to match their economic opinions, voters did precisely the opposite: changing their economic retrospections in order to reflect their feelings about Bush. As the candidates focused their messages on the economic situation, particularly their differing views about the strength of the recovery from the 1991 recession, voters who already approved of President Bush adopted increasingly positive economic opinions. Similarly, voters who disapproved of the President in 1991 came to see the economy in a more negative light. This type of “projection” effect (also: endogeneity or reverse causation)<sup>35</sup> is well documented (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Erbring et al. 1980; Sears and Lau 1983; Carsey and Layman 2006) and is especially concerning here because of the oft-reported endogeneity between economic perceptions and political opinions (e.g. Bartels 2002; Wilcox and Wlezien 1993; also: Wlezien et al. 1997; Anderson et al. 2004; Evans & Andersen 2006). Gerber and Huber (2009, 2010), for instance, find that voters quickly

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<sup>35</sup> Note again the difference between this definition of projection from the process by which voters assign their own issue positions to their favored candidate (e.g. Conover and Feldman 1982; Markus and Converse 1979).

change both their evaluations of economic performance and their real world economic behavior in response to news about whether or not their favored party will maintain power.

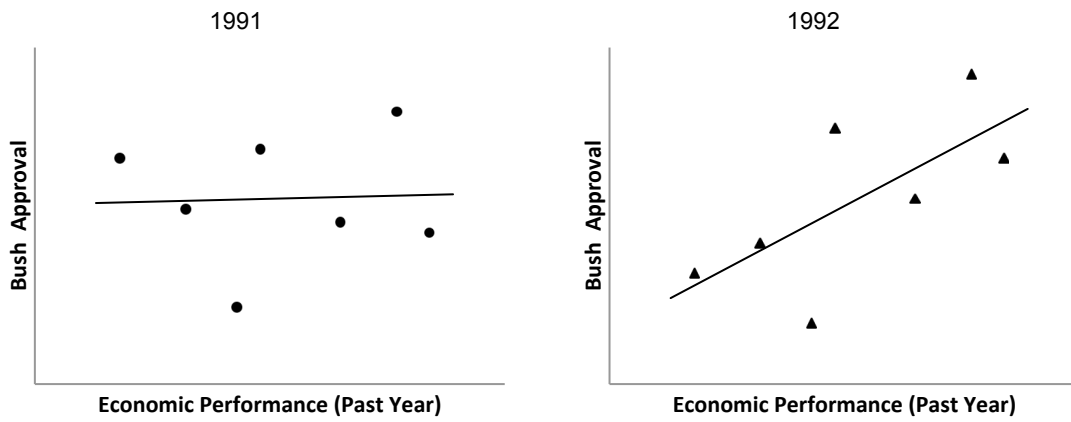
Unfortunately, the conventional methodology cannot rule out projection as a plausible alternative explanation for the effects identified above. This is because priming and projection effects manifest in precisely the same way: the researcher observes an increase over time in the correlation between economic opinion and vote choice. Because economic perceptions and vote choice are measured simultaneously, there is no way to determine the cause of the apparent economic priming effect.

Figure 3.3 represents this problem of “observational equivalence” visually. The graphs in Panel A present a stylized example of the results of a conventional test for economic priming. They show a marked increase in the contemporaneous correspondence between economic opinion and Bush approval from 1991 to 1992. This is evidenced by the increase in the slope of the linear prediction line ( $\Omega = b_3 - b_2 > 0$ ). To infer that this is evidence of economic priming, as most researchers do, is to assume that, as depicted in Panel B, voters altered their evaluations of President Bush to reflect their prior economic retrospections (note the shift along the vertical axis from the gray dots to the black triangles). However, as Panel C makes clear, the same increase in the contemporaneous correspondence between economic opinion and vote choice could also be caused by a shift in economic opinion (note the shift across the horizontal axis from the gray dots to the black triangles). Within the confines of the existing methodology these markedly different causal processes yield exactly the same results: the slopes of the linear prediction lines in 1992 ( $b_3$ ) are equivalent.

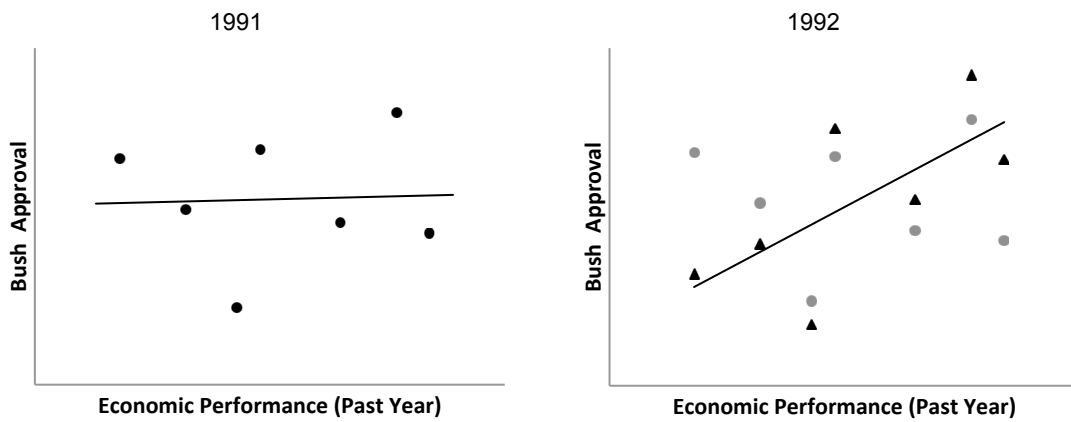
Given this threat of reverse causality, conventional estimates of economic priming can be misleading, even backwards. Where projection effects are present, conventional

Figure 3.3: The Problem of Observational Equivalence

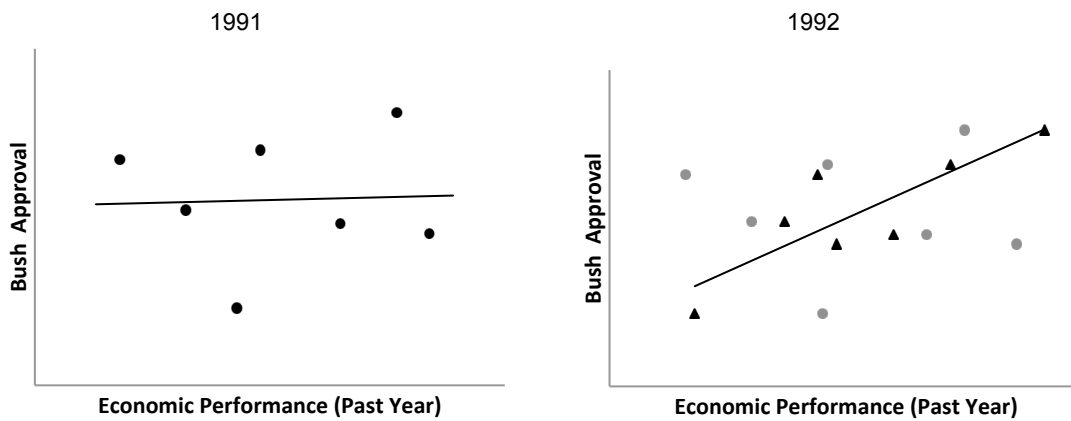
**A. The conventional result: Contemporaneous Correspondence**



**B. The presumed cause: Priming**



**C. The plausible alternative explanation: Projection**



tests will likely overestimate the magnitude of the economic priming effect and may even yield a false positive in favor of priming. Lenz's (2009) recent study, for instance, reveals that four cases of apparent issue priming were actually the result of projection-like effects and not priming.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the conventional method may actually underestimate economic priming effects in the absence of projection. Unfortunately, there is no way to know a priori whether projection poses a threat. Given the uncertainty of the direction of bias and its potential severity, conventional estimates of the economic vote and economic priming are of little use. Fortunately, there is a way forward. In the next section I draw on Lenz's (2012; also Hart & Middleton 2012) corrective procedure and outline a method for detecting economic priming that is not susceptible to bias due to reverse causation.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Panel Data Solution**

Isolating economic priming effects and eliminating the threat of projection necessitates the analysis of panel data. Respondents in a panel study are interviewed at multiple points in time. In the present case, this means that thermometer ratings of President Bush and opinions of the nation's economic performance are recorded in the initial 1990 study wave and then again in the subsequent 1991 and 1992 waves. This repeated-measure structure of the data allows the researcher to determine the extent to which the association in Figure 3.2 is driven by changes in evaluations of President Bush

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<sup>36</sup>In a later study, Lenz (2012) finds no evidence of priming in nine of ten cases of apparent issue priming. However, he does find evidence that the economic vote was primed in all three elections he examines, including the 1992 election. My results in the next section support this finding. Lenz, however, remains agnostic as to the cause of economic priming. Moreover, while his evidence from three elections is notably the first unconfounded evidence that voters actually use economic opinions to evaluate candidates, no clear pattern emerges that suggests a way in which we might confidently adjust conventional estimates to correct for bias due to projection.

<sup>37</sup>This method is also appropriate for detecting other types of priming effects in observational analysis.

(as in Panel B of Figure 3.3) and not by shifts in economic opinion (as in Panel C). Priming and projection, therefore, are no longer observationally equivalent.<sup>38</sup>

In order to generate an unconfounded estimate of the priming effect, I begin by assuming the model:

$$(3.6) \quad y_{w2} = \alpha_{w2} + b'_{w2}x_{w1} + \rho_2 y_{w1} + u_{w2}$$

where  $y_{w2}$  represents vote choice recorded at wave 2 (e.g. between Bush, Clinton, and Perot, or simply Bush approval);  $\alpha_{w2}$  is the intercept term;  $x_{w1}$  is economic retrospections measured at wave 1;  $b'_{w2}$  represents how well wave 1 economic retrospections predict wave 2 vote choice;  $y_{w1}$  is wave 1 vote choice;  $\rho_2$  represents how well wave 1 vote choice predicts wave 2 vote choice; and  $u_{w2}$  is an independently distributed error term with mean zero. For simplicity, I eliminate the  $i$  subscript and any control variables. By using wave 1 responses for the independent variables, this model eliminates the threat of reverse causation (i.e. wave 1 economic opinion precedes, and therefore cannot be determined by, wave 2 vote choice).

In essence, this is a model of change in vote choice (see the appendix for a mathematical explanation). Contrast this with the conventional model, which incorrectly specifies the dependent variable as static vote choice or approval. The economic priming hypothesis, however, relates economic opinion to over-time change in the outcome variable. Recall that a priming effect occurs when a voter who believes the economy has gotten worse over the last year adopts a *more negative* opinion of the incumbent-party

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<sup>38</sup> A few experimental studies do measure issue approval prior to the stimulus (e.g. Sears and Funk 1999; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Mendelberg 2001; Banks and Valentino 2012), and, although they find evidence of priming (alternatively: Huber and Lapinski 2006), the outcome variable is another issue attitude, not overall approval. Several studies use a similar method to evaluate priming in voting decisions, yet the results are mixed. While some find evidence of priming (Hart and Middleton 2012) others do not (e.g. Berger et al 2008, Brewer et al. 2003).

candidate. This is true regardless of whether that opinion is positive or negative on the whole.

Given Equation 3.6, I calculate the strength of the economic vote at wave 2 ( $\psi_{w2}$ ) as the marginal effect of economic retrospections. Note the difference in notation from the conventional, confounded estimate ( $\phi_2$ ). Assuming a linear specification and a continuous measure of vote choice:

$$(3.7) \quad \psi_{w2} = \frac{\partial y_{w2}}{\partial x_{w1}} = b'_{w2}.$$

I use this same method to calculate the economic vote at wave 3 ( $\psi_{w3}$ ). Again, assume wave 3 vote choice,  $y_{w3}$ , is defined as:

$$(3.8) \quad y_{w3} = \alpha_{w3} + b'_{w3}x_{w2} + \rho_3 y_{w2} + u_{w3}$$

where the substantive interpretation of all terms remains the same as in Equation 3.6 but economic opinions and lagged vote choice are measured using wave 2 responses. The wave 3 economic vote, therefore, equals:

$$(3.9) \quad \psi_{w3} = \frac{\partial y_{w3}}{\partial x_{w2}} = b'_{w3}.$$

To test for economic priming, I compare these unconfounded estimates of the economic vote:

$$(3.10) \quad \Delta = \psi_{w3} - \psi_{w2}.$$

In basic terms, this tests whether economic opinions are more predictive of change in evaluations of Bush after the 1992 campaign raised the salience of the economy. Specifically, it represents the difference between the impact of economic

retrospections on change in Bush approval between 1990 and 1991 against the impact on the change in Bush approval from 1991 to 1992.

Using the 1990 – 91 – 92 ANES Panel data, Table 3.3 presents OLS estimates of Equations 3.6 and 3.8 along with estimates of a “fully specified” model. For ease of interpretation, Figure 3.4 displays these results graphically. Even after eliminating the problem of reverse causality, the evidence demonstrates that the economic vote was indeed primed over the course of the 1992 election campaign. Although economic opinion in 1990 had no discernible effect on changes in Bush approval ( $\psi_{w2} = 2.75$ ;  $p = 0.43$ ), economic evaluations in 1991 were highly predictive of shifts in Bush approval over the course of the election. Specifically, a change from viewing the economy in 1991 as “much worse” to “much better” is associated with about a 16-point increase in Bush thermometer rating. It is unlikely that this shift was observed by chance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The difference between these two estimates represents a 13-point spike in the strength of the economic vote over the course of the campaign. Interestingly, this estimate is negligibly smaller than the conventional estimate. However, estimates of the fully-specified model suggest that the conventional test actually understates the economic priming effect. Regardless, the conclusion based on the unconfounded evidence supports the claim that the economic vote was activated during the 1992 presidential campaign.

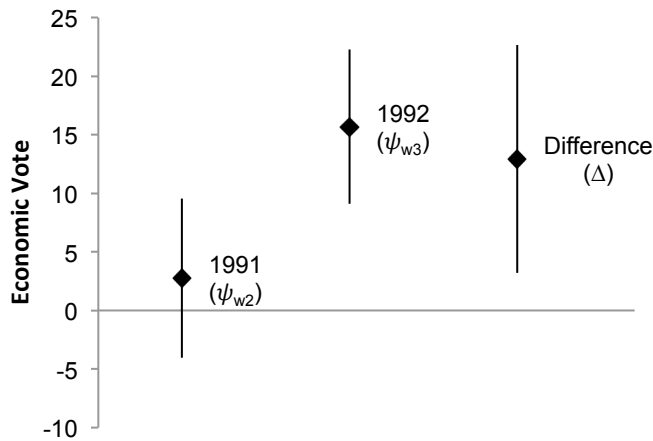
Although the difference between these estimates and those derived from the conventional, confounded method, this is a worthwhile step. After all, Lenz (2009, 2012) finds evidence of projection in 8 of 12 tests where the conventional method identified priming. The circumstances in which one is likely to observe priming and not projection effects (as in 4 of the 12 tests) remains poorly understood. Until the literature as a whole gains a better understanding of this contingency, I argue that researchers must employ panel data methods like the one developed here to evaluate questions of priming.

Table 3.3: Three-Wave Test of Economic Priming

DV: Bush Thermometer	Sparse	Full
<i>Post Indicator</i> ( $\alpha_{w3} - \alpha_{w2}$ )	-23.07*** (2.83)	-24.45*** (6.08)
<i>Prior Economy</i> ( $\psi_{w2} = b'_{w2}$ )	2.75 (3.46)	2.04 (3.33)
<i>Prior Economy*Post</i> ( $\Delta$ )	12.94** (4.67)	10.53** (4.50)
<i>Prior DV</i> ( $\rho_{w2}$ )	0.64*** (0.03)	0.56*** (0.03)
<i>Prior DV*Post</i> ( $\rho_{w2} - \rho_{w1}$ )	-0.07* (0.04)	-0.12*** (0.04)
<i>Prior Democrat</i>		-4.45* (2.47)
<i>Prior Democrat*Post</i>		7.81** (3.51)
<i>Prior Republican</i>		1.56 (2.56)
<i>Prior Republican*Post</i>		14.33*** (3.60)
<i>Prior Ideology</i>		3.74 (3.02)
<i>Prior Ideology*Post</i>		4.99 (4.00)
<i>Prior Female</i>		1.56 (1.30)
<i>Prior Female*Post</i>		0.23 (1.84)
<i>Prior Education</i>		-8.13*** (2.62)
<i>Prior Education*Post</i>		6.09* (3.69)
<i>Prior Income</i>		6.93** (2.74)
<i>Prior Income*Post</i>		-9.14** (3.89)
<i>Prior Abortion</i>		-4.19 (2.62)
<i>Prior Abortion*Post</i>		-3.50 (3.69)
<i>Prior Death Penalty</i>		5.88*** (1.90)
<i>Prior Death Penalty*Post</i>		-3.38 (2.71)
<i>Constant</i> ( $\alpha_{w2}$ )	29.93*** (1.90)	32.16*** (4.34)
<i>Observations</i>	913	913
<i>R-squared</i>	0.447	0.499

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

Figure 3.4: Economic Priming in the 1992 Presidential Campaign



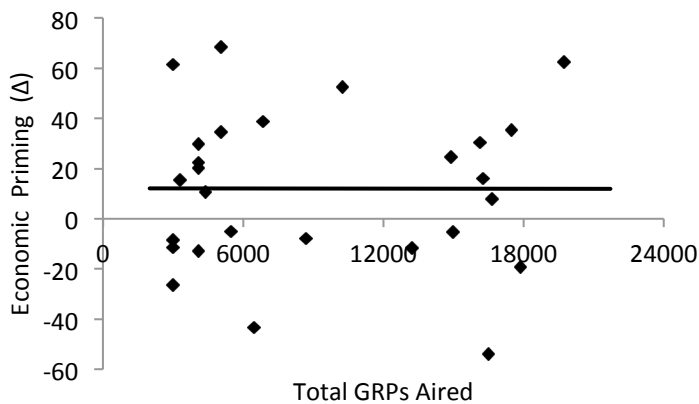
### THE CHALLENGE OF ISOLATING THE CAUSES OF ECONOMIC PRIMING

Why did voters turn increasingly to their opinion of the nation's economic performance to evaluate candidates during the 1992 campaign? Both conventional economic voting theory and the priming-based model I forward here predict economic priming over the course of the 1992 campaign, yet they point to very different causes. Conventional economic voting theory points to exposure to the campaign writ large. My priming-based approach, by contrast, argues that exposure to the candidates' economic campaign ads in particular amplified the economic vote.

Unfortunately, adjudicating between these distinct explanations of the activation documented in Figure 3.4 turns out to be an extremely difficult task. Simply noting the high percentage of economic messages aired by the candidates is insufficient. Unlike US 2000 and MX 2000, where the intensity of the campaign was high but the economic message absent, voters' exposure to campaign messages and to economic messages was similarly high in 1992. Either factor might be priming the economic vote.

Differentiating these effects empirically requires suitable measures of voters' exposure to each type of message between the 1991 and 1992 panel waves. To this end, I define a respondent's overall exposure to the candidates' messages as the number of gross rating points (GRPs) aired in the respondent's state during the general election campaign.<sup>39</sup> If conventional economic voting theory is correct, economic priming should be most evident in states where the advertising effort was strongest. Evaluating this possibility, Figure 3.5 plots OLS estimates of economic priming ( $\Delta$ ) by state over the total number of GRPs aired in that state.<sup>40</sup> The slope of the linear prediction line through the array is statistically indistinguishable from zero. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, this suggests that a voter's overall exposure to the campaign had no effect on the weight she attached to economic considerations when evaluating the candidates.

Figure 3.5: Economic Priming by Total Advertising Effort



<sup>39</sup>These data were generously provided by Daron Shaw. Note that a gross rating point measures the size of the audience reached by a televised ad. A candidate who wants everyone in the Miami area, for instance, to see his ad once, purchases 100 GRPs in the Miami media market.

<sup>40</sup>The estimates used to generate this plot are available upon request from the author. Note that the ANES data does not cover respondents in all 50 states. Thus, given data limitations, I have estimates for only 28 states.

If, by contrast, a priming-based approach is correct, the economic vote should have increased with the intensity of exposure to economic ads in particular. As is so often the case, however, advertising data that records which ads were aired in which media markets does not exist for this election. Even in an election as infamous as US 1992, this hinders the researcher's capacity to draw strong inferences about the conditioning influence of economic campaign messages. Not to be hamstrung by data limitations, however, I leverage the available data to create a "second-best" measure. Specifically, I use Bill Clinton's advertising advantage (in GRPs) over Bush as a proxy for the intensity of the economic message. As documented in Table 3.1, Clinton made a concerted effort in televised ads to prime the economic vote while President Bush made several attempts to refocus voters' attention to non-economic issues (e.g. foreign policy and candidate characteristics).

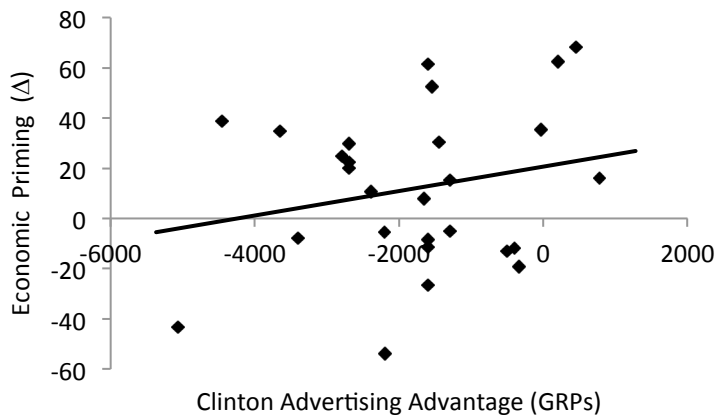
In support of a priming-based approach, the estimates in Figure 3.6 imply that voters in states where the economic message was strongest were the most likely to turn to their economic opinions over the course of the 1992 campaign.<sup>41</sup> Given the limitations of the advertising data and the non-representative samples of respondents within states, this is a very tough test of the priming hypothesis. It is encouraging, therefore, that the slope of the line of "best fit" is positive, even if not highly significant ( $p < 0.25$ ).

These results provide only suggestive evidence that the strategic decisions the candidates made about how often to focus on economic issues, especially Clinton's indefatigable attack of Bush's economic record, activated the economic vote. This is true in light of the admitted limitations of the available advertising data. Unfortunately, there

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<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, without access to detailed ad frequency data, I cannot evaluate the extent to which the candidates focused their economic messages in states where the economy was objectively worse. The evidence in the next chapter, however, alleviates this concern.

Figure 3.6: Statewide Priming Effects by Advertising Differential

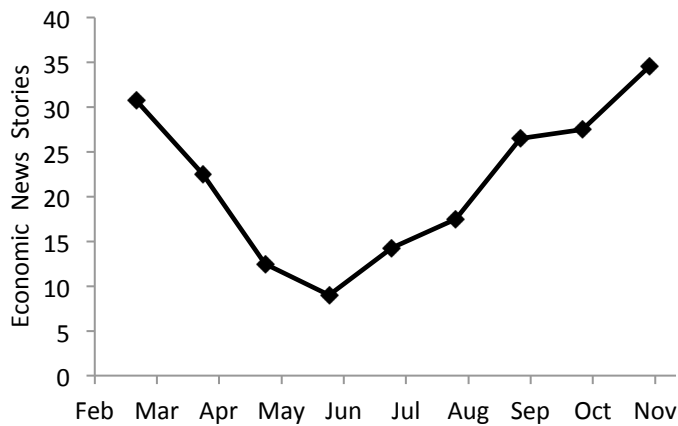


is yet another potential problem with the causal story told here, namely the potentially confounding influences of economic news and the actual economy.

First, one might argue that intense media coverage of the ongoing economic recession primed voters' economic considerations *and* caused the candidates to focus their rhetorical efforts on economic issues. Table 3.7 charts the intensity of economic news coverage in the nine months leading up to the election. To generate these data, I content coded front-page stories in the *New York Times* for any mention of the economy or economic issues. As with the campaign ads, I weighted the stories by the centrality of economic themes. The coding scheme is described in detail in the Appendix. As expected, the level of coverage is extremely high. Although there is a marked dip during the summer months, the *Times* printed more than six full stories about the economy each week in five of the nine months analyzed, including the last three.

Such intense coverage may also have motivated the candidates to focus on economic issues. Bush's repeated accusations that the media were overly pessimistic about the state of the economy are well documented. Feeling the need to defend the

Figure 3.7: Economic News Coverage



Note: The stories are weighted by economic content.

ongoing recovery, President Bush may have said more about the economy during his campaign than he would have otherwise. Similarly, Clinton and Perot may have seen the news coverage as a sign of latent dissatisfaction and amplified their economic message in an attempt to capitalize on the incumbent's increasingly salient weakness.

This is a plausible, if highly speculative, story. There is reason, however, to doubt the priming influence of economic news. Specifically, news coverage of the economy was consistently high and negative as far back as the fall of 1990 when the economic recession began. Data from the Survey of Consumer Attitudes reveals that about 60% of Americans heard negative news about the economy in the months before the 1990 wave of the ANES panel. This number then spiked as the recession set in and remained at an average of 75% for the next two years. Exposure to economic news, therefore, remained relatively constant while economic voting increased dramatically. Recall that the analysis above reveals that in 1991, when reported exposure to negative economic news peaked, economic retrospections had no discernible influence on

evaluations of Bush. Because a constant cannot explain variation over time, news media coverage is unlikely to explain both the intensity of the campaign economic message and activation of the economic vote.

Second, one might wonder if campaign strategy was driven by changes in objective economic circumstance. However, the economy was notably stagnant during this campaign. The recession of the prior years had stalled even before the primary campaigns began, and the economy had stabilized. In fact, as I documented in the narrative accounts of the campaign, the question that plagued the Bush campaign was why the economy wasn't recovering more quickly. The late realization that the economy would remain stagnant, not a change in the economy, eventually drove Baker to advise a shift to a deactivating strategy. In this way, the national economic context is unlikely to explain both the candidates' strategic choices and the marked increase in the strength of the economic vote.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results presented throughout this chapter are suggestive of the power of campaign messages to condition the strength of the economic vote. I demonstrated, first, that voters were primed to evaluate the candidates along economic dimensions over the course of the campaign. Those who held negative opinions of the nation's recent economic performance, for instance, adopted increasingly negative views of President Bush. By establishing this point, I demonstrated the insufficiency of existing tests for campaign priming and developed a method that avoids the pitfalls which plague prior analyses. Second, I used television advertising data to show that the strength of the economic vote increased the most in states where Clinton held the largest advertising

advantage in the general election campaign. Most importantly, this variation in the economic priming effect was not related to the overall level of advertising in a given state. Finally, I attempted to rule out news media coverage of the economy as a possible confound. All of this is consistent with the predictions of a priming-based approach to economic voting and inconsistent with the conventional wisdom.

The results, however, are not conclusive. Limited data availability makes it impossible to know how many economic ads versus non-economic ads were aired in a given state. Advertising differentials are a useful proxy in this case because Clinton's overall message focused more on the economy than Bush's, yet is difficult to rule out the possibility that the campaign in general activated the economic vote. Similarly, it would be imprudent to discard the potentially confounding influence of economic news coverage on both the intensity of the candidates' economic messages and the degree of economic priming. One purpose of this chapter, therefore, has been to demonstrate the difficulty of evaluating a campaign-based approach to economic voting against the conventional structural model. This is true even in a case like the 1992 election where the economic campaign message was so intense and economic voting so prevalent.

The point here is not to sew pessimism in the mind of the reader about what to expect in the coming chapters. Using the methods developed here, it is possible to evaluate the effect of individual-level exposure to economic messages in particular. However, one very clear takeaway point is the importance of case selection. The eventual stumbling blocks faced here would be avoided in an election where the economic message was strong, detailed advertising data were available, and news coverage of the economy was infrequent. The next chapter turns to one such case.

## **Chapter 4: The Impact of a Surge in Activating Economic Messages, Mexico's 2006 Presidential Election**

With 108 days to go before the election, Mr. López Obrador appears to have consolidated his position as the front-runner, and many political strategists now predict he will win unless he stumbles spectacularly.

*– New York Times, March 19, 2006*

On July 2, 2006, Mexican voters elected Felipe Calderón of the incumbent National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, or PAN) by the narrowest margin of victory in the country's history: a mere 0.58% of the official national vote. In the tumultuous months that followed, the Federal Elections Tribunal certified the controversial results amidst numerous and serious allegations of fraud. The PAN standard-bearer was sworn in despite physical brawls on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies and massive street protests led by defeated leftist challenger Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, or PRD).<sup>42</sup>

The left was shocked. Calderón was a long shot, not even the favorite to win the PAN primary let alone the general election. As the opening quote to this chapter hints at, some observers initially predicted he would finish in third place, behind Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI). The double-digit lead maintained by the charismatic and wildly popular López Obrador through most of the campaign made Calderón's eventual comeback even more

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<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that all PRD members protested the result. The President of the Chamber of Deputies, Ruth Zavalata Salgado, for instance, recognized Calderón's victory.

improbable. Yet, Calderón emerged victorious from a bruising campaign remembered for its focus on economic themes. How did he snag victory from the jaws of almost certain defeat?

Calderón's comeback aside, what makes this case so important in the study of economic voting is that the flood of economic campaign messages that came to characterize this bruising contest was notably absent in its early stages. The unexpected emergence of economic issues in late March was catalyzed by a sudden and dramatic shift in Felipe Calderón's campaign. Behind in the polls by ten points and unable to close in on López Obrador, Calderón suddenly moved to "activate" the economic vote. He fired his chief adviser, spent \$20,000 on a weekend consultation with American strategist Dick Morris, and adopted "the economy" as the centerpiece of his message (notably without any shift in objective economic context). Clearly, the PAN standard bearer believed that his initial message was holding him back and that his success depended on a sea change in campaign focus. Rather than remain idle, López Obrador and Madrazo engaged their opponent in a debate over the Mexican economy's solid but unequal growth under Vicente Fox and the policies each would pursue as a result. Subsequently, Calderón overcame the double-digit deficit and won a razor-close election.

To what extent did the dramatic surge of activating economic messages affect voters' willingness to evaluate the candidates along economic lines? Conventional economic voting theory would suggest that Calderón's shift in *strategy* would have little impact on the pervasiveness of economic voting in the Mexican electorate or, consequently, his final vote share. Considerations of Mexico's recent economic growth would have asserted themselves in the minds of voters regardless. Calderón's comeback, by this logic, was merely coincidental to his decision to take up the economic mantle. Precisely the opposite, my campaign centered-theory of economic voting implies that

Calderón's shift was a turning point in the campaign (Moreno 2009). The sudden wave of economic campaign messages with which he saturated the airwaves in the wake of this strategic move primed the economic vote and drove Calderón to a surprising victory.

This fascinating electoral contest represents an important test of my priming theory, particularly with regards to the effect of activating economic messages, for three reasons. First, campaign effects are difficult to identify in established democracies where there is greater parity in campaign effort and partisan identification is strong.<sup>43</sup> In Mexico, by contrast, party identification is weak and the flow of campaign information is often unbalanced (e.g. Lawson and McCann 2005; McCann and Lawson 2003; Greene 2011). Second, the dramatic shift to an activating campaign in MX 2006 approximates a natural experiment. The sudden "injection" of economic messages into the electorate provides a rare opportunity to assess the effect of economic rhetoric in particular. Lastly, the detailed advertising data available for MX 2006 allows me to test the priming hypothesis against the conventional wisdom directly. Unlike Chapter 3, where I could only guess which ads were aired in which markets, the data I employ here allows me to differentiate individuals based on how many economic ads they saw and when.

In these ways, MX 2006 is an ideal complement to the evidence from US 1992 presented in the last chapter. On the one hand, these activating campaigns are similar in important ways. Both elections were framed in economic terms—as a referendum on the ruling party's economic performance and a battle over the economic policies each candidate would pursue—and the incumbent-party candidate in each election switched advisors in the middle of the campaign and pursued a new strategy. On the other hand, the challengers pursued strategy in MX 2006 that would activate the economic vote while

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<sup>43</sup>While a few scholars identify large campaign effects (recently: Huber & Arceneaux, 2006), others identify minimal effects (e.g. Finkel, 1993) or strong effects for only a minimal portion of the population (e.g. Hillygus & Shields, 2008). On Mexico, see Greene, 2011.

George H.W. Bush pursued a deactivating strategy. In addition, strong out-partisans in US 1992 were motivated psychologically to reject Bill Clinton's activating campaign in order to maintain cognitive consonance. Thus, there is reason to believe that the activating effects identified in the last chapter may have been muted by the countervailing effect of Bush's culture-centered message and voters' partisan-induced resistance. Given the weakness of these factors in MX 2006, the conclusions drawn here build on the prior results and provide a clearer picture of the conditioning influence of political communications and campaign strategy on the strength of the economic vote.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. The first provides a brief overview of the political and economic context surrounding MX 2006 and discusses the economic message in detail. The second section shows that the economic retrospections became increasingly predictive of vote choice over the course of the 2006 campaign, but only after Calderón's rhetorical shift to the activating strategy. Combining panel data with advertising frequency data, the third section demonstrates that the increase in the economic vote varied systematically with individuals' exposure to televised economic ads. The fourth section rules out several potential alternative explanations for these findings, showing that Calderón's rhetorical shift in particular, not the unfolding of the campaign more generally, primed the economic vote. Unless otherwise noted, the data analyzed in this chapter comes from the Mexico 2006 Panel Study (Lawson et al. 2007). As a point of reference, the three study waves were conducted in October 2005 (Wave 1), May 2006 (Wave 2), and July 2006 (Wave 3, shortly after the July 2 election).

## **POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKDROP OF THE 2006 ELECTION**

The 2006 presidential contest was the focal point of Mexico's first general election since the transitional election of 2000.<sup>44</sup> Prior to the 2000 election (discussed in detail in Chapter 5), Mexico had not seen a single peaceful handoff of power between political opponents since independence from Spain in 1810 and had been under the "dominant-party rule"<sup>45</sup> of the PRI for a remarkable 71 years. The shift toward electoral openness and competition began in the late 1970s. Competitiveness increased further in response to growing dissatisfaction with years of macroeconomic instability under the PRI, notably after the 1982 crisis and subsequent adoption of market oriented economic policies in 1984. This transition was punctuated by President Ernesto Zedillo's 1996 constitutional reform—ostensibly allowing the PAN and PRD to compete with the PRI on a more even playing field—and culminated in the victory of PAN candidate Vicente Fox in 2000.

The proximity of this major transition helps explain why such a large portion of the Mexican electorate was "persuadable," or still shopping for a candidate, at the outset of the 2006 campaign (Greene 2011). The notion that the PAN and PRD had become viable governing parties, rather than mere opposition parties, was still very new. In conjunction with the long-term dealignment from the PRI, voters had only weak attachment to the parties themselves.<sup>46</sup> This lack of deep psychological attachment was exacerbated by two factors.

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<sup>44</sup> Whether or not this was a "democratizing" election is a point of serious debate. While Greene (2007) argues that it is, Schedler (2005), for instance, argues that democratization occurred in 1994.

<sup>45</sup> This is the term used by Greene (2007). Magaloni (2006), however, refers to this period of PRI rule as "hegemonic party autocracy."

<sup>46</sup> Over 28% of Wave 1 participants did not identify with a major party and only 25% claimed to be strong identifiers.

First, like elections before it, the 2000 election was framed (at least by the two leading candidates) as a choice for or against the PRI, rather than a choice amongst three parties (Domínguez and McCann 1995, 1996; Paolino 2005). Second, Vicente Fox operated at the centrist fringe of the center-right PAN. His stances on a number of issues perturbed the party's old guard (Shirk 2005; Langston 2009), but allowed him to build the broad coalition beyond the PAN base that was necessary to unseat the ruling PRI. Once in power, however, the party's ranks did not grow appreciably. Thus, prior support for Fox provided very little guidance to voters in the 2006 election. In fact, among respondents in the Mexico 2006 Panel Study who reported voting for Fox in 2000, a meager 55% cast their ballot for his PAN-successor, Felipe Calderón.<sup>47</sup> One effect of weak partisanship in this period was the volatility of candidate support. At the individual level, a staggering 50% of panel respondents switched their vote intention at some point in the campaign. Similarly, national polls saw substantial changes in the aggregate vote share of each candidate, captured most notably by Calderón's surprising comeback. This political context also helps explain how López Obrador was able to build such a broad coalition early in the campaign.

Beyond the political context, Mexico's complex economic performance under Vicente Fox provides an important backdrop for the strategic decision that all three candidates made in pursuing activating campaigns. There were two distinct faces to Fox's economic record. For the first three years of his *sexenio*, Mexico's economy was stagnant. In Fox's first year alone, GDP growth hovered just above zero and nearly 700,000 jobs were lost.<sup>48</sup> In the latter half of his term, however, the economy grew

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<sup>47</sup>To alleviate concerns about the accuracy of the reported vote for Fox in 2000, I calculated Calderón support among respondents who approved of Fox's performance as president. Buttressing my results, I found only 47% voted for Calderón.

<sup>48</sup>"A Survey of Mexico," *Economist*, November 18, 2006, 9.

steadily. Although this upward trend was buttressed by rising oil prices, inflation remained low and unemployment, though high, declined. Most importantly, the PAN government successfully maintained the macroeconomic stability achieved under Zedillo. The Mexican economy had recovered nicely in the wake of the spillover from the U.S. recession and consumers had not been hit by the kind of boom and bust cycles they were accustomed to in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the Standard & Poor country risk rating dropped to an all-time low, falling from 411 to 112, and the availability of consumer credit surged. Despite Fox's economic successes, however, problems of unemployment and poverty persisted. These lingering problems were epitomized by the chronic and rising tide of emigration to the U.S.

Faced with these complex economic circumstances, candidates were forced to make their decisions about which issues to focus on in public addresses and televised ads. Public opinion provided some guidance with respect to economic issues. Economic retrospections tilted positively: over 40% of October panel respondents thought the economy was about the same as when Fox took office and almost 32% of panel respondents thought it had improved only "somewhat." It might seem clear, then, that the incumbent party candidate, Felipe Calderón, stood to gain by activating the economic vote (i.e. by emphasizing economic performance and economic issues).

However, about one third of respondents identified the economy as the most important problem facing the nation—higher than any other issue—and nearly 92% indicated that the economy needed either urgent or very urgent attention.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, some sort of economic dissatisfaction was widespread. This could suggest that challengers

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<sup>49</sup>For the "most important problem" question, I calculate the percentage answering "the economy," "poverty," "inflation," or "unemployment." For the urgency questions, the percentage represents those who responded "very urgent" or "urgent" to three questions about the urgency of "job creation," "macroeconomic stability," and "poverty."

stood to gain by tapping into this anxiety. Eventually, both challengers came to believe that speaking about economic issues would benefit their campaign (even if they did not consider the effects this would have on the strength of the economic vote).

## **THE CAMPAIGN AND THE ECONOMIC MESSAGE**

In this section, I present a detailed analysis of the 2006 campaign with a particular focus on the economic message.<sup>50</sup> I begin by considering how the party primaries motivated each candidate's initial rhetorical strategy. I then discuss the sudden break in the election and the causes for the injection of economic messages. More than simply documenting the campaign, I highlight specific changes in economic campaign rhetoric so as to test my campaign-centered theory of economic voting against the conventional structure-driven model.

### **The Candidates, the Primaries, and the Early Message**

The 2006 election saw two important firsts for the PRD. It was the first time that the party's nomination for president went to someone other than Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—the party's founder and perennial candidate. It was also the first time that the PRD became a viable front-runner for the general election.<sup>51</sup> Andrés Manuel López Obrador had been christened the early favorite to earn the nod as the PRD nominee. As the mayor of one of the world's largest cities, López Obrador built a sparkling national and international reputation on the back of his ambitious political agenda for the Federal District of Mexico City. He consistently cast a sympathetic eye toward the impoverished and demonstrated his ability to withstand occasional political scandals.

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<sup>50</sup>Bruhn (2009), Langston (2009), and Shirk (2005, 2009) provide more complete accounts of the campaign.

<sup>51</sup>In 1988, Cárdenas was a viable frontrunner for the FDN. In fact, many believe he won the election.

As the primary approached, the PRD's rising star built a remarkably high approval rating (over 60%) despite operating under constant media scrutiny. Embracing the attention and ensuring his achievements did not go unnoticed, the charismatic AMLO—as he was referred to colloquially—held daily news conferences that could be broadcast nationally on Mexico City news. The national attention he garnered in this context gave him a substantial advantage in terms of popular recognition. It also helped him build a broad coalition of support that drew heavily on voters who identified with other parties or none at all. For a candidate from a small party with a relatively weak local apparatus, outperforming his party was an absolute must.

The only potential roadblock to López Obrador's nomination was the threat of a serious challenge from Cárdenas. Although Cárdenas declared early in the primary process that he would seek the nomination, he eventually declined. López Obrador's popularity amongst voters and party elites was simply too much to overcome. After Cárdenas's early exit, no one was willing to challenge AMLO and the PRD cancelled its primary elections. This early success launched López Obrador as the favorite to win the election. As discussed in the next section, it also inspired in him a sense of invincibility that explains his surprisingly delayed reaction to Calderón's sudden rhetorical shift and his eventual choice of activating rhetoric.

In contrast to the smooth-sailing PRD nomination, the divisive PRI primary rendered the eventual nominee Roberto Madrazo a virtual non-starter. Following his failed attempt to gain the PRI's nomination in 2000, Madrazo assumed the role of party president in 2002 after a tough contest that exposed numerous internal divides. Those fissures expanded in the run-up to 2006 as Madrazo prepared for another nomination bid. Eventually, his network of adversaries, including a longtime ally whom Madrazo referred to as “Jimmy Hoffa in a dress,” emerged to stymie his aspirations. Dubbed Todos

Unidos Con México (Everyone United with Mexico)—though often referred to as Todos Unidos Contra Madrazo (Everyone United against Madrazo)—TUCOM nominated Arturo Montiel, the governor of the state of Mexico. The heated contest came to an abrupt end just before the votes were cast, however, as an emerging financial scandal forced Montiel to resign. Madrazo emerged the victor with a focus on fighting crime and drug trafficking—a potent message given the steep rise in drug violence and public concern for crime. Yet, he inherited the nomination of a party divided against itself and was reduced almost immediately in the general election to the role of “also ran.”

The PAN, therefore, was the only party to hold a primary election to select their presidential candidate for the 2006 contest. Of the three candidates that emerged, Felipe Calderón was perhaps the least obvious choice to advance to the general election. The former Interior Minister Santiago Creel and former Jalisco governor Alberto Cárdenas Jiménez both had strong ties to President Fox and Creel was seen as his natural successor. Calderón, in contrast to these established politicians, had very little experience as a campaigner or as an elected official. Unlike Fox, who managed to use his centrist appeal to build a broad coalition of voters in 2000, Calderón presented himself as the establishment candidate operating on the conservative end of the center-right party. Following in his father’s footsteps, Calderón promised to be a loyal representative of the PAN’s conservative cause. His message centered on his traditional values and emphasized that he was an honest politician who had never been embroiled in scandal (Singer 2009). This message appealed to PAN insiders, especially relative to the centrist messages of Fox’s preferred candidates. Voting in the PAN primary was strictly limited to party members and “adherents.”<sup>52</sup> As the primary moved forward, this arrangement

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<sup>52</sup>It is worth noting that, as the President of the PAN, Felipe Calderón defined this category of “adherents” in its current form.

clearly favored the party-line candidate (Shirk 2009). In the only surprise victory of the primary contests, Calderón defeated won the PAN nomination against his more campaign-tested, but “party-outsider” opponents.

### **The Sudden Shift to the Economic Message**

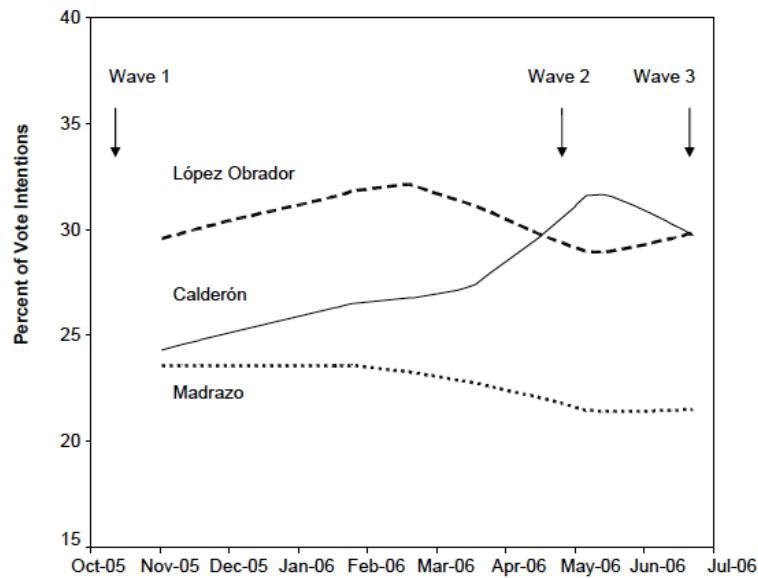
Calderón emerged from the contentious PAN primary carrying his message of transparency and values (Lawson 2009). His early general election ads aimed to reinforce the notion that he was the only candidate with “clean hands” (*Yo sí tengo las manos limpias*). Yet this message, which had been so effective in appealing to the right-leaning block of PAN insiders in the primaries, failed to resonate with the general public (Shirk 2009). Voters were convinced of Calderón’s honesty—34% in Wave 1 and 46% in Wave 2—but they were unwilling to vote for him on that basis alone.<sup>53</sup> The PAN standard-bearer had a problem. Only 67% of Wave 1 PAN identifiers intended to vote for their candidate. Far worse, only 17% of the massive group of non-identifiers supported Calderón, including only 27% of those who voted for Fox in 2000. Although Calderón held a distinct advertising advantage through the end of January, he was unable to cut into López Obrador’s commanding lead (Flores-Macías 2009). As the “poll of polls” presented in Figure 4.1 demonstrates, Calderón had overtaken Madrazo early on, but the growing number of PRI defectors were splitting evenly between the frontrunners.

Fed up with the direction of his campaign, Calderón announced on March 1 that he had fired his chief strategist and was planning to shift the focus of his campaign to the economy. He had been misled, he claimed, by his team of “so-called experts and political scientists” (Jiménez 2006). Within weeks, Calderón had rebranded himself “The

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<sup>53</sup>These figures combine “very honest” and “somewhat honest” responses. Although López Obrador was seen as more honest in Wave 1, Calderón overtook him in Wave 2. Madrazo lagged behind in both panel waves.

Figure 4.1: Tracking Candidate Support (Mexico 2006)



Note: Replicated from Greene (2011) using data from Flores-Macías (2009). Lines represent “lowess” estimates of 40 national sample surveys from November 5, 2005 to June 23, 2006.

Jobs President”—*Presidente del Empleo*. His new message highlighted Mexico’s stable economic growth under Fox and pitched himself as an extension of Fox with an eye toward employment. Memorably, his new ads portrayed López Obrador as personally unstable—noting both his public outbursts and reported intolerance—and as an extremist whose economic policies posed a “danger to Mexico”—tying him to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. As the campaign progressed, these messages focused increasingly on the PRD nominee’s supposed propensity to rack up debt.<sup>54</sup>

This rhetorical U-turn was motivated by a repeated problem encountered in the PAN’s focus groups. They found that weakly identifying *panistas* and non-identifiers

<sup>54</sup>Again, many of these messages do not focus on past economic performance. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, priming theory argues that those ads that mention economic themes will prime the economic vote nonetheless.

who supported Fox intended to vote for López Obrador because they saw no downside to him. Yet, these same voters were responsive to attacks on López Obrador's mayoral record and the two political scandals he had overcome.

In light of these findings, the Calderón campaign knew they had to focus public attention in a way that would highlight López Obrador's negatives and Calderón's positives. To hammer out the specifics of their new strategy, the PAN paid \$20,000 for a weekend consultation with American political strategist Dick Morris. Morris advised Calderón that a comeback victory would depend on winning the issues, not candidate attributes. Debating what the focus of the new message should be, the team eventually decided to prime the economy instead of crime.<sup>55</sup>

From a strategic standpoint, the choice was ideal. López Obrador commanded a broad but tenuous base of support among weak partisans and independents—presumably the most likely to be affected by the campaign. Because economic opinion was divided but positive on the whole, priming the economic vote would “cross-pressure” voters and divide AMLO's coalition in a way that favored Calderón. Unlike the ideological cross-pressures (Berelson et al. 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) common in U.S. elections,<sup>56</sup> Calderón's campaign chose economic themes as a wedge to siphon off the defecting Fox supporters and those with positive economic opinions who initially supported AMLO. Because this was not a small percentage of voters, there was substantial room for gains. Among Wave 1 (prior to Calderón's activation) respondents

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<sup>55</sup>Note, however, that there is some discrepancy about Morris's advice. Camarena and Zepeda Patterson (2007) report that Morris first suggested the campaign focus on the issue of crime, and only settled on the economy at the behest of Calderón's advisors. Regardless, there is no disagreement about Morris's insistence on winning “the issues.”

<sup>56</sup>There is very little evidence that voters were ideologically cross-pressured in the 2006 Mexican election (Klesner 2009).

with positive economic evaluations, only 35% intended to vote for Calderón and only 29% among non-identifiers.<sup>57</sup>

After his consultation, Morris briefly stayed on to help draft the first run of ads with Antonio Sola, the newly hired media consultant famous for his hard-nosed messages as advisor to José María Aznar, the conservative former prime minister of Spain. The wave of activating economic ads rolled out on March 18 and featured some of the most memorable ads of the campaign. In one of the ads pitched by Morris, a middle class family is pictured in their home wondering what a López Obrador presidency would look like. As the announcer warns of debt and economic crisis, their television, water heater, and refrigerator (typical middle class appliances in Mexico) slowly fade away. The ad accomplishes four things. It encourages Mexicans to vote on economic issues, glorifies the stability under Fox, portrays Calderón as an extension of Fox, and heightens fear of López Obrador's bold economic agenda.<sup>58</sup>

Calderón's sudden change in campaign rhetoric framed the electoral choice squarely in economic terms. Surprisingly, López Obrador did not respond to the new ads for over a month, allowing Calderón to wrest control of the terms of the debate. Understandably, he saw the switch as a sign of desperation. Through early April, his only response was a group of ads in which Mexican intellectual Elena Poniatowska criticized Calderón for "going negative" and held up AMLO as the one with the clean hands. Arguably, it was López Obrador's self-proclaimed invincibility that led him to ignore the attacks and dismiss the obvious signs (evident in Figure 4.1) that Calderón was quickly closing the gap (Bruhn 2009). At a campaign speech in April, López Obrador

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<sup>57</sup>Among Fox supporters, the number is 54%.

<sup>58</sup>Again, much of the rhetoric is prospective, as is true in other activating campaigns. However, this message will activate economic considerations more generally.

told his supporters that the attacks were actually a sign that they held a solid lead. “When they don’t criticize us anymore,” he warned, “then you should worry.”

Finally facing the facts, López Obrador fought back in late April. His delayed response adopted economic themes rather than attempting to distract from them. Thus, while Calderón sought to lure voters who approved of Fox’s recent economic performance, López Obrador took aim at activating those voters who disapproved and those who felt failed by free market economic policy. The spike in the intensity of the economic message that followed Calderón’s switch was then amplified by the PRD’s intense rejoinder. The former mayor of Mexico City offered a stinging critique of domestic inequality under Fox and promised that his administration would put the poor first (*Primero los Pobres*). In other ads he criticized Fox’s neoliberal economic policies and promoted a bold new economic model. López Obrador also touched on a swarm of minor economic issues in a series of spots that varied widely in style and appearance. In a memorable series of ads directed at lauding the benefits of AMLO’s economic plan, ordinary smiling citizens were shown in stores with bulging wallets and overflowing purses as the refrain “you will earn more” (*Ganarás más*) played in the background.<sup>59</sup>

Not to be outdone, even PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo incorporated *ad hoc* economic messages into his law and order campaign. Although economic issues were never the focal point of his message, economic themes suddenly appeared in numerous ads. He even adopted a new, catch-all slogan—More security, more employment, less poverty (*Más seguridad. Más empleos. Menos pobreza*). In this way, Madrazo’s spots attempted to link problems of crime, drug trafficking, and emigration to the lack of fruitful employment under Fox.

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<sup>59</sup>Surprisingly, Bruhn (2009) and Moreno (2009) both argue that these messages were not economic. Although they differ in important ways from Calderón’s economic ads, I argue that they are economic ads nonetheless. As such, priming theory holds that they should activate the economic vote.

This wave of activating economic messages, adopted without any change in actual economic performance, carried the campaign through to election day. All three candidates came to believe that they stood to gain from encouraging voters to cast their ballots based on economic considerations (either prospective or retrospective), and they each had a point. As a reflection of the two faces of Fox's economic record, public opinion about Mexico's past economic performance was divided. Capitalizing on these divisions could draw enough support to give one candidate the victory.

Why did the switch to activating economic messages not occur sooner? Although it is not possible to answer this question fully here, it is worth speculating. As I outlined in this section, the closed PAN primary forced Calderón to appeal to his party's conservative base. When his initial values-laden message failed to erode AMLO's lead, he made the switch. López Obrador ignored the shift early on because he felt untouchable as the front-runner. He had advanced through the primaries unopposed, scaring off all of his potential challengers, including the founder of the PRD. His eventual response was to double down on economic themes in hopes of activating latent dissatisfaction with the performance of Mexico's neoliberal economic model. In the end, however, Felipe Calderón overcame a substantial deficit and edged out the leftist challenger by just 0.58% of the popular vote.

With the benefit of hindsight, Calderón's economic switch appears to have been a savvy strategic decision and López Obrador's response was likely a miscalculation. Looking back at Figure 4.1, it is clear that in the two months following the March 18 decision to activate the economic vote, Calderón erased a 6-point deficit and built a 3-point lead. Although López Obrador drew the race even after he fired back at Calderón's attacks, Calderón never relinquished the lead. Was this shift in fortunes due to the sudden injection of economic messages as my argument suggests? The extent to which

the change in campaign strategy altered the strength of the economic vote and, by extension, the final vote tally is taken up in the next two sections.

### **AGGREGATE-LEVEL TEST OF ECONOMIC PRIMING**

My campaign-centered theory of economic voting suggests that Calderón’s bold adoption of activating economic rhetoric and the challengers’ decisions to raise activating economic themes primed the economic vote. As the strength of the economic vote increased, voters shifted their support towards Calderón. As a result, the economic message sparked Calderón’s come-from-behind victory. Here I analyze the response to the injection of economic messages using the panel method developed in Chapter 2.

I first regress vote choice—between Calderón, Madrazo, and López Obrador—on economic retrospections at each of the three panel waves. Based on the multinomial logit estimates of this model, I calculate the size of the economic vote as the marginal effect of economic retrospections on the probability of voting for Calderón. This captures the sensitivity of vote choice to changes in economic evaluations. More specifically, it equals the predicted change in the probability of voting for Calderón given a hypothetical improvement in Wave 1 evaluations of recent economic performance from “much worse” to “much better” for the mean respondent. This provides a single measure of the economic vote and avoids the difficulty of comparing multinomial logit coefficients across choice alternatives and across panel waves. Given this setup, priming is evident if the size of the economic vote increases between panel waves.

In order to help rule out plausible alternative explanations for any apparent priming effects, I control for a respondent’s party identification, economic policy preferences, perceived probability of a Madrazo victory (Greene 2011), gender, skin

color, religiosity, household income, and interest in politics.<sup>60</sup> I also eliminate the threat of reverse causality by measuring all independent variables using Wave 1 responses. This ensures that an observed increase in the strength of the economic vote across panel waves is evidence of priming rather than projection.<sup>61</sup> Finally, I control for a respondent's Wave 1 vote intention so that the results capture over-time change in the probability of voting for Calderón rather than the static likelihood.<sup>62</sup> The multinomial logit estimates of these models, along with information about variable construction and scaling, are presented in the Appendix. I also present estimates of sparsely specified models to ensure the reader that the estimates from the full models are not dependent on the chosen set of controls. Based on these results, Figure 4.2 tracks the estimated strength of the economic vote at each panel wave.

The data reveal substantial priming of the economic vote after Calderón's decision to amplify his economic message. From Wave 1 to Wave 2, the strength of the economic vote increased dramatically from 0.01 to almost 0.23. Between Waves 2 and 3, as López Obrador and Madrazo intensified their economic messages, the economic vote climbed again to 0.40. It is unlikely that these effects are due to chance (all are significant beyond the  $p=0.05$  level).

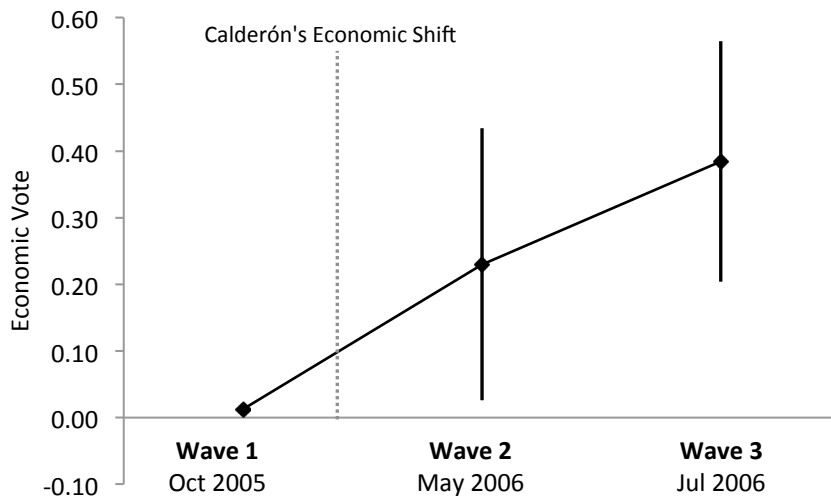
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<sup>60</sup>Prior studies highlight the importance of these variables in the voting decision in the 2006 election (e.g. Klesner 2009; Lawson 2006). I do not include variables focusing on older "regime divides" that were so important to voting prior to the democratizing 2000 election (e.g. Dominguez and McCann 1995; Molinar Horcasitas 1991) as these cleavages no longer dominated the vote (e.g. Flores-Macías 2009).

<sup>61</sup>As discussed in Chapter 2, comparing marginal effects across models that use contemporaneous responses, one cannot determine if an increase is caused by priming—shifting vote choice to reflect retrospections—or rationalization—projecting prior vote choice onto current economic opinion. Panel data eliminates confusion because past responses cannot be caused by contemporaneous responses (Lenz 2009; 2012).

<sup>62</sup>These results are likely not biased by panel attrition. In fact, the wave 1 correspondence between economic opinion and vote choice among respondents who stayed in the sample is statistically equal to the correspondence among those who dropped out. This is consistent with prior findings (Lawson 2006).

Figure 4.2: The Strength of the Economic Vote in the 2006 Campaign



Note: Point estimates represent the estimated marginal effect of Wave 1 economic retrospections on the probability of voting for Calderón in each panel wave (i.e. the change in the probability of voting for Calderón given a hypothetical shift in economic opinion from “much worse” to “much better”). Bars are 95% confidence intervals around these point estimates. Note also that the confidence interval at Wave 1 is too small to be visible on this scale.

Although it is impossible to know how the outcome might have been different if the economy had not been activated, it is worth speculating here about the consequences of economic priming. To do so, I use the estimates of the full Wave 3 model to predict each respondent’s vote choice. I repeat this process using the estimated Wave 1 coefficients for *ECONOMY*. Comparing the vote tallies, the model suggests that economic priming alone increased Calderón’s vote total by more than 4 points. This is more than one-fifth of Greene’s (2011) estimate of the effect of the entire campaign and is far larger than Calderón’s 0.58% margin of victory. Even in the final two months of the campaign, Calderón’s predicted tally increases by 2.5 points. Similar to Moreno’s (2009) analysis, these results point to the central importance of economic priming for the final vote tally in the 2006 election.

## THE EFFECT OF EXPOSURE TO ECONOMIC CAMPAIGN ADS

What can account for this pattern of activation? Both conventional economic voting theory and priming theory predict an increase in economic voting across the 2006 campaign. Yet, priming argues that this effect was driven by voters' exposure to the economic campaign message in particular. Here I test these competing claims by evaluating the effect of exposure to televised economic campaign ads on the economic vote.<sup>63</sup> If priming holds, economic opinion will become increasingly predictive of vote choice with exposure to economic ads.

Evaluating these hypotheses requires a measure of respondents' exposure to economic campaign messages. To this end, I compiled ad frequency data from the Mexican Federal Electoral Institute's (IFE's) daily monitoring of campaign advertisements. These data record each airing of a political ad across 19 of Mexico's 32 states.<sup>64</sup> In total, the data record 35,191 ad airings. I then content-coded the video of all 307 candidate-sponsored presidential ads televised during the general campaign. I coded each ad for any spoken mention of the economy and weighted each spot—from 0 to 1—by the centrality of the economic message, assigning greater weight to spots focused on the economy. To differentiate the potential impact of each ad, I weight individual airings—from 0 to 1—by the time slot in which they aired. I assign greater weight to ads aired in prime time, for example, from those aired in the late fringe. Lastly, to control for individual-level differences in the propensity to view campaign ads, I weight the ad measures by a respondent's reported television-watching habits (i.e. how often they

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<sup>63</sup>Content analysis of the candidates' campaign speeches, conducted as part of the Mexico 2006 Panel Study, reveals that the intensity of the economic message in public addresses mirrors the intensity in televised ads.

<sup>64</sup>Data is available for Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Distrito Federal, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán. As a result, the panel is restricted to these states. Note also that the findings in Figure 1 remain unchanged if the sample is limited to the 19 states for which ad data is available.

watch the news, soap operas, and soccer games). Further details on content coding, weighting, and coding reliability are available in the Appendix.

I evaluate the effect of these ads by modeling vote choice as a function of ad exposure from Wave 2 to Wave 3.<sup>65</sup> I regress Wave 3 vote choice on Wave 1 economic retrospections, exposure to televised economic campaign ads and an interaction between the two.<sup>66</sup> I also include the control variables listed in the prior section (measured using Wave 2 responses) and the overall level of advertising as a control for the intensity of the campaign in each state. Multinomial logit estimates of this model are presented in Table 4.1. As a robustness check, I also present estimates of a sparsely specified model and a model that does not weight ad exposure by the frequency of television watching.<sup>67</sup> In all three I present robust standard errors clustered by state.

Again, the results support the priming hypothesis that exposure to economic ads conditions the strength of the economic vote. In all three models, the influence of economic retrospections on vote choice is positively related to individual-level exposure to the economic message and significant at  $p=0.01$ .<sup>68</sup> Because Calderón is the reference category, this effect is evident because the estimated coefficient for the interaction of economic opinion and exposure to economic ads is negative and statistically significant. This implies that a voter with a positive Wave 1 economic opinion is more likely to vote for Calderón if she has seen a high number of economic ads in particular than if she has

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<sup>65</sup>Because the ad data begin four months after Wave 1 interviews, I focus only on the Wave 2 to 3 period. Note again that frequency of exposure to campaign ads has the greatest effect on issue salience than the recency of exposure (Claibourn 2008). Respondents' timing of exposure to the ads between Waves 2 and 3, therefore, is of little importance.

<sup>66</sup>Economic retrospections were not measured at Wave 2, so I use Wave 1 measures.

<sup>67</sup>As a further check, I estimated models that weight ad exposure by a respondent's interest in politics. The coefficient estimates and p-values differ only slightly and the substantive conclusions not at all.

<sup>68</sup>Because Calderón is the omitted category, a negative coefficient for the interaction signals a positive relationship.

Table 4.1: A Test of the Conditioning Effect of Economic Campaign Ads

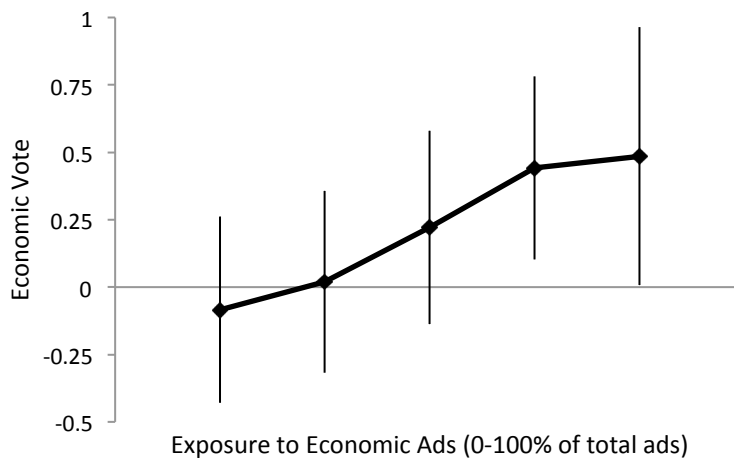
DV: Vote Choice (Wave 3)	Full Specification		Sparse Specification		Non-Weighted	
	Madrazo	AMLO	Madrazo	AMLO	Madrazo	AMLO
<i>Total Campaign Ads</i>	-4.64 (11.95)	4.28 (21.68)	-5.10 (15.17)	-4.96 (20.42)	-4.18 (6.66)	9.92 (9.35)
<i>Economic Campaign Ads</i>	19.34 (18.16)	4.89 (32.99)	18.03 (23.13)	16.42 (31.08)	11.01 (10.10)	-10.14 (14.03)
<i>Economy (W1)</i>	-0.16 (1.23)	1.18 (1.36)	-0.15 (1.30)	0.31 (1.04)	0.12 (1.31)	1.23 (1.50)
<i>Economy * Economic Ads</i>	-21.55** (6.14)	-17.80** (4.93)	-18.85** (5.69)	-13.93** (3.79)	-9.92** (3.08)	-6.23** (2.16)
<i>Perredista</i>	-0.38 (0.96)	1.11 (0.67)	-0.52 (0.89)	0.92* (0.45)	-0.38 (0.96)	0.98 (0.64)
<i>Priista</i>	0.61 (0.68)	0.10 (0.31)	0.28 (0.72)	-0.33 (0.48)	0.56 (0.68)	-0.04 (0.33)
<i>Panista</i>	-1.91* (0.97)	-1.63** (0.61)	-1.76 (0.98)	-1.50** (0.56)	-1.99* (0.97)	-1.63* (0.63)
<i>Privatization</i>	-0.15 (0.44)	-0.46 (0.69)			-0.06 (0.46)	-0.44 (0.70)
<i>US Trade</i>	-0.18 (0.53)	-0.83* (0.38)			-0.22 (0.54)	-0.77* (0.38)
<i>Security</i>	0.46 (0.36)	0.14 (0.41)			0.38 (0.41)	0.07 (0.45)
<i>Poverty</i>	-0.01 (0.39)	-0.29 (0.43)			0.03 (0.38)	-0.38 (0.44)
<i>Pr(PRI victory)</i>	-0.47 (0.95)	-3.03** (0.77)			-0.44 (0.95)	-2.99** (0.81)
<i>Religiosity</i>	0.92 (0.53)	-0.46 (0.50)			0.80 (0.57)	-0.45 (0.47)
<i>Light-skinned</i>	0.14 (0.63)	0.30 (0.42)			0.13 (0.63)	0.23 (0.44)
<i>Income</i>	0.19 (0.90)	0.51 (0.90)			0.40 (0.90)	0.51 (0.89)
<i>Female</i>	-0.04 (0.34)	-1.42** (0.44)			-0.10 (0.34)	-1.47** (0.44)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	-0.76 (0.62)	-0.17 (0.58)			-0.78 (0.57)	-0.10 (0.58)
<i>Calderón Vote Intention (W2)</i>	-4.49** (1.33)	-0.87 (0.85)	-4.22** (1.31)	-2.09** (0.74)	-4.34** (1.28)	-1.13 (0.94)
<i>AMLO Vote Intention (W2)</i>	-0.66 (0.96)	3.41** (0.74)	-0.43 (0.75)	1.93** (0.58)	-0.60 (0.98)	3.11** (0.84)
<i>Madrazo Vote Intention (W2)</i>	1.23 (0.73)	0.27 (0.87)	1.44 (0.76)	-1.29 (0.78)	1.30 (0.75)	0.11 (0.86)
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.68		0.65		0.68	

N=447. Multinomial logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. Calderón is the baseline category. Unless otherwise noted, all variables are measured using Wave 2 responses. All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

ween a low number. Similarly, a voter with a negative Wave 1 retrospection is more likely to vote against Calderón if she has seen a high number of economic ads.

Although this is the appropriate test of the hypothesis that exposure to economic ads conditions the strength of the economic vote, Figure 4.3 presents a visual interpretation of these results, charting the strength of the economic vote among non-identifiers by the level of exposure to economic ads.<sup>69</sup> If economic campaign messages condition the economic vote, the trend will move upward with exposure to economic ads. If the *particular* messages a candidate disseminates are unrelated to their effect, as economic voting theory predicts, then the slope of the economic voting line will be indistinguishable from zero.

Figure 4.3: The Economic Vote by Level of Exposure to Economic Ads



Note: Points represent the estimated economic vote for an average non-identifier at different levels of exposure to economic campaign messages (as a percent of overall messages). The vertical bars around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals.

<sup>69</sup>I vary exposure in terms of the number of economic ads as a percentage of total ads. All other variables set to the sample means. I used the CLARIFY package in Stata to generate these point estimates and standard errors.

Against this conventional expectation, the results reveal that exposure to economic ads powerfully conditions the economic vote. The slope increases markedly with exposure to economic ads. When economic ads constitute a small percentage of the overall ads to which the voter is exposed, economic opinion has no impact on vote choice. However, as exposure increases, economic opinion becomes more and more predictive of Calderón support.

#### **POTENTIAL CONFOUNDS AND A TEST OF THE MECHANISM**

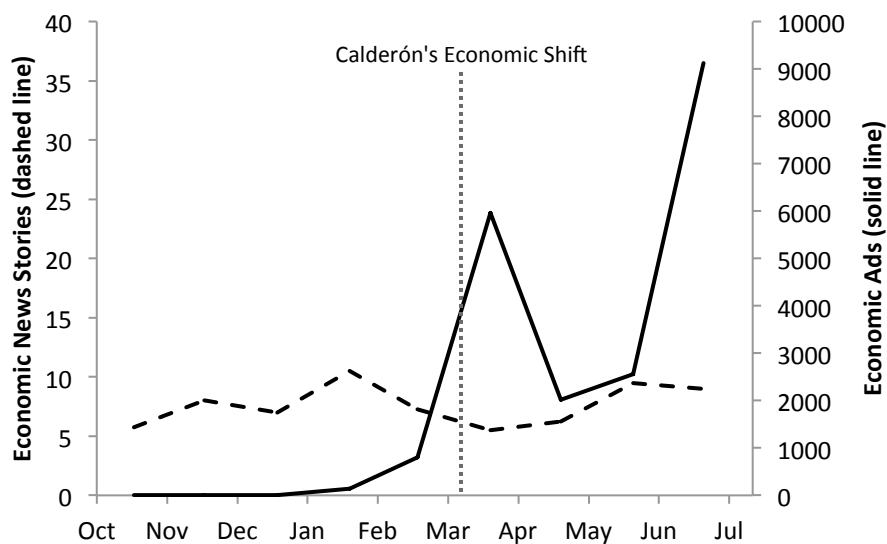
Before concluding that the observed priming effect was the result of economic messages, however, it is necessary to rule out several possible confounds. The first is a change in objective economic circumstances during the campaign. If there was a positive shift in the economy, perhaps a large drop in unemployment, this change could have raised the salience of the economy and caused the candidates to focus on it in the campaign. Yet, unlike past Mexican elections, when political business cycles induced economic swings as elections approached, quarterly GDP growth during the campaign ranged between 1.4% and 1.9%, and unemployment increased just 0.013%. Clearly, this does not represent a notable shift in economic performance.

Second, the news media's coverage of the economy could have primed the economic vote. There is substantial evidence that economic news may increase the weight voters attach to economic variables (notably Iyengar and Kinder 1989; Mutz 1995). It is even possible that media coverage dictated the campaign's issue focus. To control for this possible confound, I coded news stories published in *Reforma*, a leading national newspaper. Specifically, I hand-coded all front-page stories over nine pre-

election months for any mention of the economy. The articles were then content weighted using the method devised for the campaign ads. Further details of the content coding are given in the Appendix.

The results, displayed in Figure 4.4 against the intensity of the economic message in televised ads, show that economic news did not prime the economic vote. The economy received very little attention in the media and the only spike in coverage followed the shift in campaign discourse. At the same time, there is a marked increase in the number of economic ads aired on television. Although there is a quick dip in the message in May, the flow picks up again quickly. Content coding of news stories aired on TV Azteca and Televisa (done as part of the Mexico 2006 Panel Study) reveals the same absence of economic themes in televised news. This rules out news media coverage as an alternative account of the findings presented above.

Figure 4.4: Economic News Coverage and Televised Economic Ads



Note: The calculations of both the total number of news stories in each month and the total number of ads aired are weighted by the extent of economic content.

Third, I have assumed that the observed increases in the economic vote are evidence that exposure to economic ads raised the salience of economic considerations, which caused voters to reevaluate the candidates along economic lines. Yet one might worry that they could reflect the mere tightening of the race (van der Brug et al. 2007). As Calderón closed the gap on López Obrador, the marginal effect of economic retrospections on vote choice may increase irrespective of the campaign. Moreover, the measure of exposure to economic ads could proxy for the likelihood of being a swing voter or the likelihood of becoming an economic voter regardless of exposure. Allison (1999) and Williams (2009) note that observed differences in slope coefficients across subgroups of a population may actually reflect differences in residual variation rather than underlying differences in the effect of the independent variable. This is particularly problematic in split-sample designs, which mine is not. However, error variance may also differ across levels of a continuous variable such as exposure to economic messages.

Following Singer (2011), I address these concerns by testing the proposed causal mechanism, evaluating whether or not the salience of economic considerations increased in accordance with the predictions of priming theory. Here I regress a binary measure of Wave 3 economic salience—equal to one if the respondent reported an economic issue as the “most important problem” facing the nation—on exposure to economic ads. I control for prior economic salience, exposure to the overall message, party identification, and, in the fully specified model, the controls from the prior analyses. Consistent with the priming hypothesis, logit estimates of these models are presented in Table 4.2. They reveal that the salience of economic considerations increases significantly with exposure to economic ads.

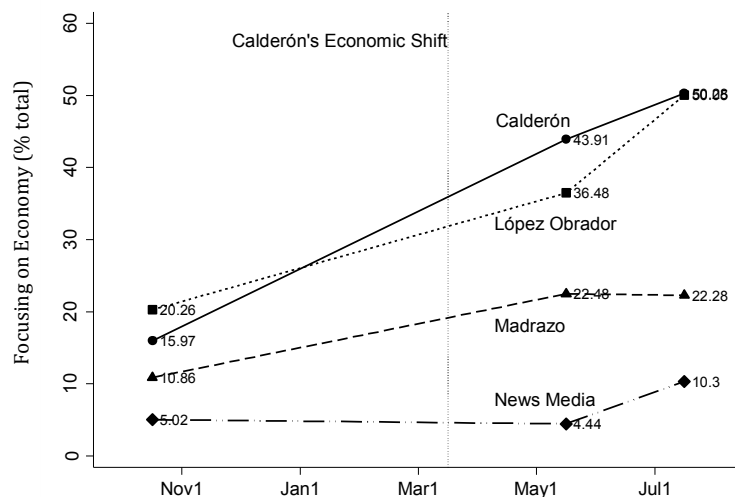
Table 4.2: The Effect of Economic Ads on the Salience of the Economy

	<b>DV: Economy is the Most Important Problem (Wave 3)</b>	
<i>Economic Campaign Ads</i>	50.23*	49.41*
	(23.89)	(21.08)
<i>Total Campaign Ads</i>	-35.66*	-35.26*
	(15.66)	(13.76)
<i>MIP: Econ (W2)</i>	2.08**	2.15**
	(0.28)	(0.27)
<i>Perredista</i>	0.57*	0.50*
	(0.27)	(0.25)
<i>Priista</i>	0.16	0.17
	(0.33)	(0.28)
<i>Panista</i>	0.14	0.26
	(0.37)	(0.32)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>		0.86*
		(0.41)
<i>Privatization</i>		-0.38
		(0.31)
<i>US Trade</i>		-0.30
		(0.53)
<i>Security</i>		0.13
		(0.21)
<i>Poverty</i>		-0.30
		(0.22)
<i>Religiosity</i>		0.19
		(0.51)
<i>Light-skinned</i>		-0.16
		(0.29)
<i>Income</i>		-1.05
		(0.59)
<i>Female</i>		-0.22
		(0.15)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.42**	-0.91*
	(0.29)	(0.39)
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.19	0.21

N=383. Logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. All variables are measured using Wave 2 responses and are scaled from 0 to 1. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

As a robustness check, I also analyzed responses to questions about the issue environment during the campaign. Participants in all three waves of the Mexico Panel Study were asked to report what issue was receiving the most attention from each of the candidates and the media. Specifically, respondents were asked two questions: “What issue is receiving the most coverage on TV news?”; “To what issue is [name] devoting the most attention?” The percentage of respondents highlighting an economic issue is presented in Figure 4.5. Clearly, voters were aware that economic themes were largely ignored early on. Following Calderón’s switch, these totals approximately doubled for all three candidates. Moreover, the increase is largest for Calderón, signaling that voters were aware that he led the charge and that the other candidates, especially Madrazo, followed. Finally, voters distinguished this increase in the intensity of the economic campaign message from the infrequent news media coverage. This provides further evidence that economic evaluations became more salient during the campaign.

Figure 4.5: Perceived Candidate and Media Focus on Economic Issues



Note: Lines represent the percentage of respondents by wave who report that the candidate or news media was paying the most attention to economic issues. “Don’t know/Refused” responses are excluded.

Following my theoretical expectations, these results suggest that economic campaign messages primed the economic vote in Mexico's 2006 presidential election. The strength of the economic vote increased markedly through the middle of the campaign season and continued to rise through election day. These changes correspond to the sudden increase in the intensity of the economic message in March and the persistent increase through the finale. These findings squarely contradict the conventional wisdom, which cannot account for the observed variation in the economic vote or its relationship with dynamics of political communication.

One unusual aspect of these findings is that support for López Obrador did not fall continuously in the wake of the shift to the economic message. In fact, it recovered briefly once the PRD-nominee fired back at Calderón's attacks. How is this possible given that economic evaluations were positive on average? Clearly something other than the economic vote was driving up López Obrador's standing in the polls, even if the effect of economic priming was enough to hold off his late surge. Priming was taking place during this period, but so was something else. I suspect that López Obrador's brand of economic message (i.e. policy oriented) was doing more than just activating the economic vote. Exposure to these messages may also have primed positions about free market economic policies, an issue on which he stood to gain. His rebuttals to Calderón's accusations about his propensity to create economic crisis, may also have activated (or even changed) opinions about his capacity as president to handle the economy. I leave it to future researchers to evaluate these possibilities.

## CONCLUSION

Conventional economic voting theory assumes that the strength of the economic vote is unaffected by partisan campaigns. Although candidates and strategists hold that their efforts are electorally decisive, extant economic voting theory contends that these effects are overpowered by the ubiquitous influence of economic forces. Yet, the results presented in this chapter demonstrate that the conventional economic voting model cannot explain the outcome of the 2006 Mexican presidential election without reference to the dynamics of the campaign and the decisions the candidates made about what to say to voters about the economy and how often.

Rather than an inevitable consequence of electoral campaigns, I found that Calderón's strategic decision to activate the economic vote catalyzed his impressive comeback by drawing voters' attention to Mexico's recent economic success. The economic vote rose sharply in the wake of Calderón's switch. I found that exposure to televised economic ads in particular primed economic considerations in the minds of voters and influenced their final vote decision. Voters who saw high levels of economic campaign ads were much likelier to evaluate Calderón based on their evaluation of national economic performance than voters at low levels of exposure. These findings are contrary to the expectation of conventional economic voting theory that the content of campaign messages is epiphenomenal to their effect on the economic vote. However, the findings are entirely consistent with the predictions of priming theory.

These results demonstrate that had different decisions been made in the course of the campaign, López Obrador, the alternative to the free market economics of the PAN, likely would have emerged victorious. More generally, the analyses in these last two chapters reveal that the strategic choices candidates make during the campaign can help them to overcome unfavorable economic circumstances or capitalize on favorable ones.

They highlight the crucial importance of political agency in the study of economic voting and underscore the need to integrate the role of campaign priming into a theory of economic voting.

## **Chapter 5: The Effect of an Absent Economic Message in the 2000 U.S. and Mexican Elections**

To this point, I have shown that presidential candidates in two elections strategically primed the economic vote. They increased the frequency with which they televised economic campaign ads, and voters, to the extent that they were exposed to the ads, responded by reevaluating the candidates along economic lines. This is consistent with the predictions of a priming-based model of economic voting and is a crucial step in demonstrating that political communications condition the strength of the economic vote. However, not all candidates take up the economic banner as the centerpiece of their message, and very few campaign dialogues revolve around the economy as centrally as they did in the 1992 U.S. and 2006 Mexican presidential elections. What, then, is the effect on the strength of the economic vote when candidates choose not to talk about the economy or find themselves unable to focus on it (i.e. when the hypothesized moderating variable takes on the value “low” instead of “high”)?

In this chapter I answer this question by analyzing the 2000 U.S. and 2000 Mexican presidential elections (often referred to hereafter as US 2000 and MX 2000). I select these cases because economic campaign messages were memorably absent throughout both campaigns. In the lead up to US 2000, the dialogue between the two major parties’ nominees—Republican challenger and Texas Governor George W. Bush (hereafter G.W. Bush to distinguish him from George H.W. Bush) and sitting Vice-President Al Gore—focused on a wide and ever-changing array of issues: education, social security, immigration, the environment, Christian morality, trustworthiness, and more. Yet the candidates said very little about the nation’s unprecedented prosperity.

Gore never sustained an effort to activate the economic vote and, for long stretches of the campaign, actually aired fewer economic messages than his Republican opponent.

While economic messages were similarly absent in MX 2000, the theme of democracy, though conceived of differently by the candidates, wholly dominated the campaign. The early barrage of change-oriented messages unleashed by challenger and Guanajuato Governor Vicente Fox of the center-right National Action Party (PAN) captured the public's imagination as well as the rhetorical attention of the other leading candidates, and ensured that the election would be framed as a referendum on PRI rule (Lawson 2004, p. 9). Caught up in the debate over Mexico's democratic future, and frustrated by Fox's uncanny ability to turn policy-specific dialogue into a debate about regime change, Francisco Labastida of the incumbent Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) never committed to priming voters' considerations of Mexico's recent economic success (Bruhn 2004).

To what extent, then, did the near absence of activating economic messages in these campaigns affect the weight voters attached to economic considerations? Conventional economic voting theory would predict that economic opinion became increasingly predictive of vote choice over the course of the US 2000 and MX 2000 election campaigns (e.g. Campbell 2001). According to this logic, exposure to campaign messages in general amplified the economic vote over time even if voters were not exposed to economic messages in particular (Gelman and King 1993). With respect to the candidates and their communication strategies, this implies that Gore and Labastida's decisions to focus on non-economic themes had no bearing on the strength of the economic vote. Similarly, Fox and G.W. Bush's strategies of deflection and distraction could not stop the election from becoming a referendum on economic performance.

By contrast, my priming-based theory holds that the economic vote in US 2000 and MX 2000 was not activated because voters were not exposed to economic campaign messages. Therefore, considerations of the nation's past economic performance became or remained difficult for voters to call to mind when casting their ballot, and the effect of these considerations on vote choice did not increase throughout the campaign. Instead it became or remained insignificant.<sup>70</sup> In this way, the candidates' respective communication strategies explain why voters did not become economic voters.

With these competing hypotheses in mind, this chapter evaluates the impact of an absent economic message on the strength of the economic vote in US 2000 and MX 2000 respectively. For each case, I briefly describe the electoral context and then document the candidates' communications strategies, paying special attention to their handling of economic issues. I corroborate the descriptive account with content coding of televised campaign ads and ad airing data. I then use the method for analyzing longitudinal public opinion studies developed in Chapters 3 and 4 to assess changes in the strength of the economic vote over the course of each campaign.

The evidence supports a priming-based approach handsomely. While both campaigns were hotly contested and leaned heavily on paid media, in the absence of economic messages citizens did not come to base their vote choices on economic retrospections. In MX 2000, the economic silence actually deactivated the economic vote, severing the strong connection between vote choice and economic opinion that existed at the outset of the general election campaign.

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<sup>70</sup>For my purposes, becoming and remaining insignificant are equivalent because they depend solely on the initial strength of the economic vote. If the economic vote is strong at the beginning of the campaign, it may decline in the absence of economic messages. However, if the effect of economic perceptions on vote choice is insignificant at the beginning of the campaign, it cannot decline. Therefore, deactivation—a drop in the strength of the economic vote—should not be seen as a more powerful or more important effect than non-activation—the persistent insignificance of the economic vote.

## **THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE 2000 U.S. ELECTION**

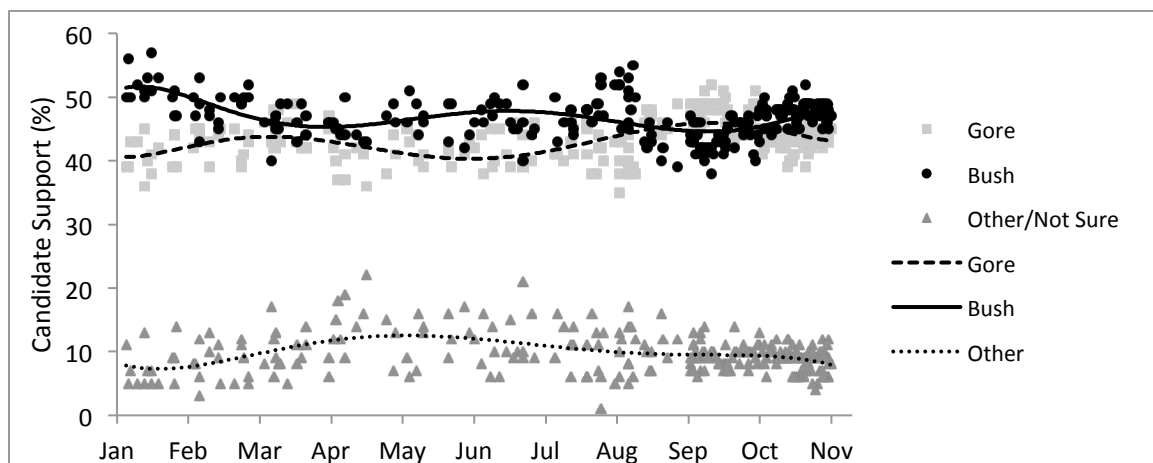
Al Gore did something no presidential candidate had ever done: he conceded victory twice in the same election. The first concessionary phone call came early in the morning of November 8 (the day after the election) when the major television networks announced that G.W. Bush would carry the state of Florida and, consequently, win the election. Gore, however, rescinded his forfeiture less than one hour later when his campaign team began questioning the networks' inference (fewer than 2000 votes out of 6 million cast separated the candidates in Florida). Moreover, the proximity of the vote differential in Florida made a recount inevitable under state law, temporarily rekindling Gore's presidential aspirations. The second call came five weeks later after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Bush v. Gore* that statewide standards could not be established in time for a recount. This concession had considerably more staying power than the first.

These events in the days and weeks following the election may be more memorable than the many months of campaigning that preceded them. In fact, the late-night parodies of the candidates' highly scrutinized gaffes (e.g. Gore's penchant for exaggeration and G.W. Bush's mispronunciations) may stand out more in hindsight than the particular messages the campaigns so carefully crafted and delivered. Yet the contest did not lack for high political stakes. Setting aside the unforeseeable impact of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the policy decisions made in its wake, the political consequences of the election were clear. The winner would be tasked with nominating as many as two new Supreme Court Justices and possibly a new Chief Justice. The race would also test the robustness of the New Democrats without Bill Clinton who, with Gore at his side in 1992, interrupted what many thought was a new era

of Republican dominance.<sup>71</sup> Finally, the victor would be gifted an enormous budget surplus and charged with managing the nation's seemingly endless economic prosperity.

The incredible strength of the economy during the Clinton years certainly raised the electoral stakes. Yet, according to conventional economic voting theory, it also should have made the election a formality on the road to four more years of Democratic rule. In perhaps the clearest example of this logic of economic determinism, a panel of top election forecasters convened at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) to deliver their prognostications for the presidential election just 70 days away. As is evident in the “poll of polls” presented in Figure 5.1, the race had drawn even, but Gore was trending upward quickly. Consistent with the predictions of enlightened preference theory (Gelman and King 1993), it appeared as though voters

Figure 5.1: The “Poll of Polls,” US 2000



Note: Each point represents the candidate's surveyed support among the public. The trend lines through each array are local polynomial smoothing lines. The data used to generate this figure are described in further detail in Appendix C.

<sup>71</sup>Niemi and Weisberg (2001) provide an excellent discussion of the realignment vs. dealignment debate in American politics.

were tuning in to the election, automatically recalling the prosperity of the late 1990s, and consequently ending their flirtations with the Bush camp. Assuming the strength of the economy would assert itself in the minds of voters, the experts unanimously predicted a victory for Gore by about six points. Contrary to these predictions, however, G.W. Bush narrowly edged out Gore in one of the closest electoral tallies in U.S. history and the second closest since states began choosing electors by popular vote.

In a “post-mortem” of this now-infamous panel, a number of the chagrined modelers argued that an unusual and unexpected absence of economic priming, especially Gore’s silence on the economy, was to blame for their error (Campbell 2001; Holbrook 2001; Lewis-Beck and Tien 2001; Wlezien 2001).<sup>72</sup> Had Gore said more about the economy, he would have won. This post-hoc assessment is consistent with a priming-based approach to economic voting and is perhaps the conventional explanation of Gore’s surprising loss (alternatively: Shaw 2006). Yet scholars have not revised economic voting theory in response. Nor have they reevaluated the psychology of economic voting. Moreover, there are reasons to be dubious about this conventional conclusion.

First, some scholars identify a statistically significant post-election correspondence between individual-level vote choice and economic retrospections (e.g. Abramson et al. 2002). Second, a substantively weak economic vote is not evidence *prima facie* of the absence of economic priming. Moreover, Johnston et al. (2004) and Matthews and Johnston (2010) find that the economy-vote link actually strengthens at various points in the campaign, especially in the wake of the conventions.<sup>73</sup> Although these studies cannot rule out reverse causation as an alternative explanation (see Chapter

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<sup>72</sup> By contrast, Bartels and Zaller (2001) highlighted what they believed in hindsight were technical problems with the models, arguing that the economy was not actually positive at the time of the election.

<sup>73</sup> Both studies find that variation in the strength of the economic vote is non-monotonic. Yet, the periods of increasing correspondence are suggestive of periods of economic priming.

3 for a full methodological discussion), they are nonetheless suggestive of economic priming in the absence of activating economic campaign messages.

Finally, similarities between the dynamics of the US 2000 race and those of the 2006 Mexican presidential race give us reason to suspect the presence of economic priming. After all, both Al Gore and Felipe Calderón overcame substantial early deficits to draw the race to a near-tie. The analysis in Chapter 4 revealed that Calderón's comeback was driven largely by economic priming. Although Calderón made a concerted effort to prime the economic vote and Gore did not, the parallel arcs of these elections raise suspicion that Gore's surge in the polls was also the consequence of campaign priming. This possibility must be taken seriously; if voters came to evaluate candidates on the economy without exposure to economic stimuli, it would falsify any priming-based model of economic voting.

Evaluating this possibility requires a systematic account of the candidates' strategic handling of economic issues in their communications throughout the campaign.<sup>74</sup> It also requires an evaluation of economic priming that can rule out confounding due to projection. Interestingly, many analyses of US 2000 skip one or both of these steps. The sections below correct these omissions.

### **Communication Strategy and the Forgone Economic Message**

Al Gore entered the 2000 election stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the economic growth that marked the Clinton years gave Gore an incredible advantage over G.W. Bush heading into the race. On the other hand, Clinton—the public

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<sup>74</sup>Given the overwhelming abundance of detailed, even daily, analyses of the 2000 presidential election, I will limit my narrative to the handling of the economy. See Milbank (2001) for an excellent account from a journalist covering the race. From an academic perspective, see, for instance Abramson et al., (2002) and Johnston et al. (2004). Shrum (2008, ch. 7) and Stevens (2001) offer the view of the campaign practitioner. Shaw (2006) provides an incisive mix of these different perspectives.

face of the nation's prosperity—had become a divisive figure. His economic success kept his approval ratings high, yet his marital infidelities left him a reviled character among important segments of the voting population.<sup>75</sup> Gore's advisors were concerned, therefore, that any gains accrued from a strategy of taking credit for the economic success of the 1990s would be negated by the incidental activation of negative perceptions of the President. Even before he officially announced his candidacy, Gore's communication strategy reflected this concern about guilt by association. As Milbank (2001) notes:

The big story of the Gore announcement tour has been the candidate's efforts to separate from his boss. He spoke of the "moral leadership" invested in the presidency and criticized Clinton's sexcapades... "I'm completely different from President Clinton," he said. "I have a different set of priorities, a different approach." (p. 39)

The strategy through the primaries and early stages of the general election, therefore, was to maintain silence on the economy and forego the economic vote. Instead, Gore would focus on social security, health care, education, the environment, and more.

By the summer of 2000, however, Gore's campaign had grown impatient as they found their candidate well behind in the polls. They questioned whether they could not reap significant gains by sowing the seeds of economic content. Finally, the campaign decided to test the waters with an economic message. Gore's "Prosperity and Progress" tour in June attempted to make the opportunities afforded by a robust economy and burgeoning budget surplus a unifying theme for his otherwise disparate set of promises. This was a significant departure from Gore's message in the primary battle with Senator Bill Bradley, and was a message that Gore himself was uncomfortable peddling (Eskew

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<sup>75</sup>Zaller (1998) argues that the resilience of Clinton's support in the wake of the Monica Lewinski scandal epitomized the importance of "fundamentals," especially the economy. Thus he reiterates the conventionality of the enlightened preference perspective.

& Shrum 2001). Sarcastically labeled the “Al Gore Invented Prosperity Tour” by the Republicans, the tour failed to achieve the intended effect. Gore’s deficit persisted.

There are at least two possible explanations for this lackluster outing. One is that the message was not put across with sufficient force. The economic message featured in the public speaking tour was not complemented by a “paid media” campaign. Gore’s advisors may have anticipated significant publicity of their message, yet the coincident resignation of campaign manager Tony Coelho, and the emerging accusations about Gore’s 1996 fundraising excesses dominated the news. It could be argued, therefore, that the tour failed to prime the economic vote because voters remained unexposed en masse to economic stimuli.

Alternatively, the Gore campaign team argues that the tour was ineffective because voters did not think of Gore as a leader. As pollster Stan Greenberg explains, “Anything that we tried taking credit for the economy at that point, we found just did not work. It was not believable” (Greenberg 2001, 90). Before capitalizing on the economy, therefore, the team had to do the necessary legwork in bolstering Gore’s credentials and blemishing Bush’s record. The economic message was Gore’s closing argument, rather than his opening argument. As media consultant Bill Knapp (2001: 175) explains, “We had to achieve a lot before [the economic message] could be effective.”

Following this strategy, Gore ramped up an economic message in the final weeks that had been building implicitly throughout the campaign. Gore would put the prosperity to work for everyone, not just the wealthy. Despite the obvious populist undertones and almost negative portrayal of the economic growth of the 90s, the criticism was that the campaign was still not doing enough to prime the economic vote. Even as the economy was being mentioned more often in televised ads, the mentions were often oblique. In “Prosperity,” the economy is as central as in any other Gore ad:

I think one of the most important things is not to take our strong economy for granted. Keep on the right track. Fiscal discipline. Keep making the tough decisions, but keep investing in the things that are important for our future. You look at young children and think about how important it is for them to breathe clean air, to give them the finest education anywhere in the world. In a time when our health is everything, we've got to have more access to affordable health care. We've got to look to the future. We've got to keep our prosperity going.

Plainly, this is an economic ad. Yet, it uses the economy as a means of focusing on education, the environment, and health care. By the end, the longest economic expansion in U.S. history is almost an afterthought. Note the contrast between this ad and Calderón's message in MX 2006 of "Crisis! Crisis! Crisis!"

George W. Bush's economic messaging strategy is often ignored in accounts of the 2000 election. Though rarely acknowledged, Bush spoke more frequently about the economy than would be expected from a challenger seeking to oust the incumbent party in the midst of an unprecedented boom. Like Gore, however, G.W. Bush began the campaign faced with a difficult decision. If he said nothing about the economy or tried to downplay the nation's economic success directly, it would have been seen as disingenuous. It might also have given the Gore campaign the boost they needed to use the economic context to bludgeon the GOP standard-bearer. He had to say something about the economy and the campaign team knew this (Stevens 2001). The challenge, therefore, would be to mention the economy without significantly strengthening the economic vote and driving Gore to victory.

Opposite Gore's economic communications strategy, the G.W. Bush campaign decided to open both the primary and general elections with the nation's prosperity and close with anything but. He rooted his candidacy in the nation's economic successes. Because the economy was doing so well, the argument went, it was time to elect a "compassionate conservative" with the conviction needed to tackle the tough issues and restore America's moral standing.

In “New Solutions,” a typical Bush ad, the moderator contends that, “with our nation at peace and more prosperous than ever, now is the time to find real solutions to America’s problems.” This is an economic ad, and a positive one, in that it states very directly that the country is experiencing economic good times. Yet the retrospective economic message is obfuscated by the focus on the nation’s non-economic future. Similarly, in “A Moment,” Bush claims “we have a budget surplus and a deficit in values.” Again, the aim is to suggest how unimportant and irrelevant a good economy is in comparison to what Bush deemed to be an insipid popular culture. In addition to altering voters to Bush’s agenda for the future, I argue that these ads were also designed to limit the gains Gore might make from pursuing an activating strategy. Bush’s “compassionate” and chummy image was arguably his greatest asset, and he was far more comfortable outlining his reasons for running than engaging in detailed policy debates. If Gore chose to engage on the economy, he would give Bush an opportunity to shine. Moreover, he might force Gore to talk about his own reasons for running, a topic with which Gore was not comfortable.

Did the candidates follow their initial messaging strategies? To answer this question I combine original content analysis of televised campaign ads with the CMAG ad frequency dataset. Using the same coding technique discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, as well as in the Appendix, I coded all candidate-sponsored presidential campaign advertisements. I limit the analysis to spots televised during the general election campaign and exclude co-sponsored ads and ads sponsored by interest groups. Storyboards of each ad were obtained from the Wisconsin Ad Project (WAP). In total, I coded 228 ads, which aired a combined 97,937 times. The WAP also codes these ads for issue content. Although I choose to rely on my own coding to ensure comparability with the coding in other elections, it is worth noting that there is 98% agreement between my

coding and the WAP coding (with respect to the mention of economic issues). Moreover, the discrepancies involved five ads that I coded as economic while the WAP did not. This should allay fears that I inadvertently coded the ads to reflect my characterization of the 2000 election as a “deactivating” case.

Table 5.1 presents basic summary measures of the intensity of the economic message in each candidate’s televised campaign ads for the campaign as a whole. The results demonstrate that the economic message was weak but not absent. The economy was the primary theme in over 20% of Al Gore’s messages. This pales in comparison to the 62% of messages that Calderón aired in the activating case of Mexico’s 2000 election, but, as expected, is higher than the total for George W. Bush (14.3%). Clearly, this was not an “activating” election. In fact, economic themes were mentioned only in passing or not at all in more than 71% of all ad airings—nearly 70,000 spots.

Table 5.1: The Intensity of the Economic Message, US 2000

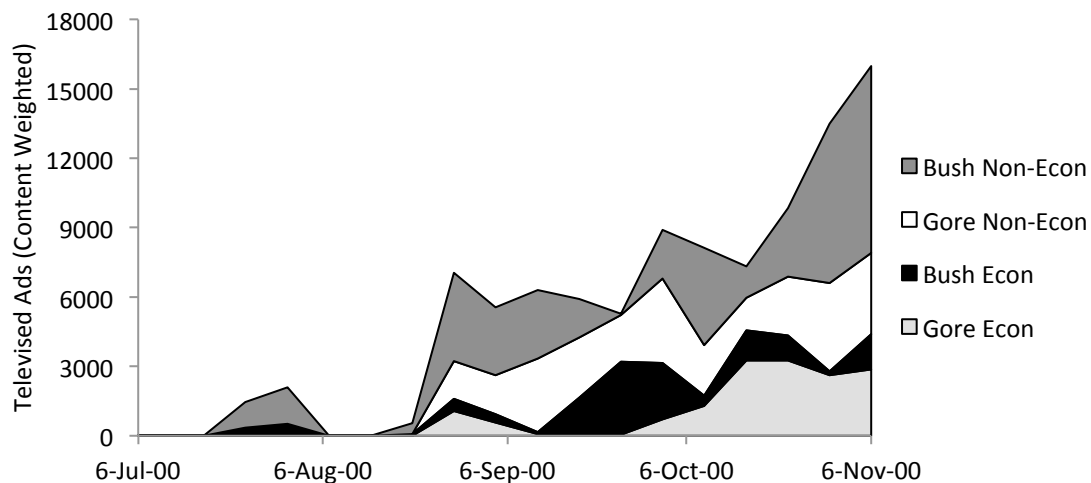
<i>Importance of the Economy in Televised Ads</i>	<b>Candidate Sponsor</b>		
	Gore	Bush	Total
<i>Primary Theme</i>	22.0%	14.3%	17.8%
<i>Secondary/Tertiary Theme</i>	11.6%	10.6%	11.0%
<i>Unimportant/No Mention</i>	66.4%	75.1%	71.2%

Note: Figures represent the percent of ad airings in each category. Calculations are based on original content coding of the ads. Each ad airing is weighted equally.

These measures provide an excellent overview of the frequency with which voters were exposed to economic campaign ads throughout the election. Yet, they provide no perspective of the temporal dynamics of the message. To get at the evolution of the economic message, Figure 5.2 tracks each candidate’s economic message by week. I

calculate the figures by subtracting the sum of the economic content weights (between 0 and 1) from the total number of ads aired. This strategy is useful in its simplicity, but it is important to note that it may overstate the intensity of the economic message.<sup>7677</sup>

Figure 5.2: The Dynamics of Televised Campaign Messages, US 2000



Note: Figure presents weekly ad totals for each candidate. All ads are weighted by their economic content using the coding technique described in Appendix B. The absence of an economic message remains if the ads are also weighted by “day part.”

Again, the data reflect the candidates’ stated communications strategies. First, it is immediately apparent that Bush did not shy away from the economic message entirely. This is especially true in the early weeks, when Bush was making the case for electing a compassionate conservative because of, rather than in spite of, the prosperity. Second, Gore did indeed open with relative silence on the economy and then ramp up the

<sup>76</sup>This is a sample footnote.

<sup>77</sup> This is because the importance of the economy is not equivalent to a measure of the absence of economic themes. For instance, an ad that mentions both the economy and social security as secondary themes would still receive a weight of 0.75, not 0.50 (i.e. signaling that half of the ad was economic and the other have focused on social security).

frequency of economic stimuli in the final four weeks of the campaign. Of course, even at this point in the campaign, Gore's economic message represented less than half of his total message.

### **Is Gore's Comeback Evidence of Economic Priming?**

Having documented the relative absence of economic messages in US 2000, I consider the possibility that Gore's sudden surge in the polls—depicted in Figure 5.1—is evidence that the campaign in general, not exposure to economic stimuli in particular, activated the economic vote. I begin by evaluating the “correspondence” effect—the contemporaneous correspondence between individual-level economic evaluations and vote choice. I then move to the “multi-wave test” of economic priming developed in Chapter 4. This method isolates priming effects and eliminates the possibility of confounding due to projection (i.e. reverse causation), which plagues estimates of the correspondence effect.

#### ***The Correspondence Effect and the Semblance of Priming***

Here I employ the conventional “correspondence method” for evaluating apparent economic priming. I utilize data from the National Cross Section of the 2000 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES). Over 44,000 respondents participated in this nationally-representative rolling cross section between April 4 and December 1, 2000. I divide subjects by date of interview into twenty-two cross-sections ( $t$ ) of roughly equal size and estimate the correspondence effect for each ( $\phi_t$ ).<sup>78</sup> To do so, I once again model vote choice as a function of a respondent's reported opinion of the nation's economic performance in the prior year. I define vote choice—intended or self-reported—as an ordered variable taking on the value -1 for G.W. Bush, 1 for Gore, and 0 for indecision or

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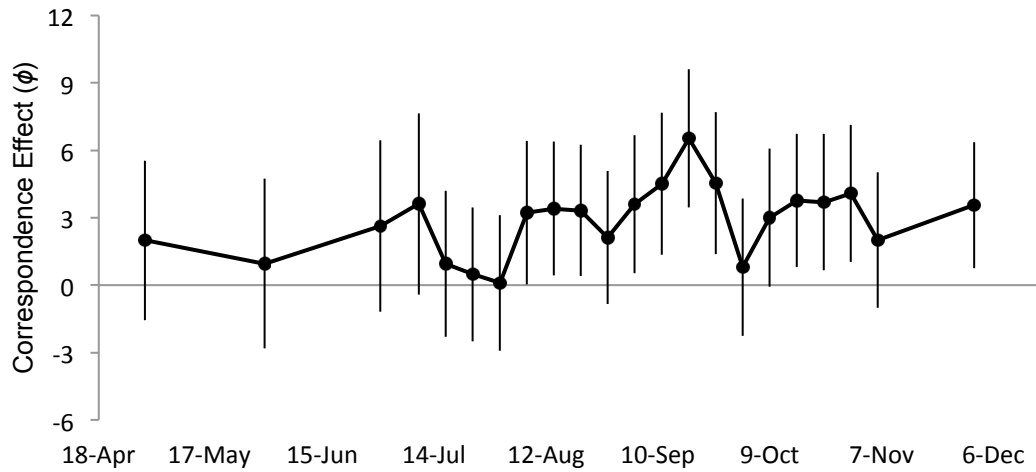
<sup>78</sup>For a review of this method, see Chapter 3.

a vote for another candidate. All variables, including vote choice, are measured contemporaneously (i.e. at time  $t$ ). As in Chapters 3 and 4, the correspondence effect ( $\phi_t$ ) equals the estimated marginal effect of economic retrospections on vote choice. An increase in this effect from time  $t$  to  $t+1$  represents what scholars have assumed mistakenly to be evidence of economic priming. To help rule out alternative explanations of any observed effect, I control for respondents' party identification, policy preferences, interest in politics, gender, family income, and educational attainment. Ordered logit estimates of this model for each cross section, along with detailed variable coding information, are presented in the Appendix.

Figure 5.3 plots the estimated correspondence effect over the course of the US 2000 campaign. Interestingly, the effect strengthens in the wake of the party conventions—precisely when Gore erases G.W. Bush's substantial lead—and is significant in the post-electoral wave. These findings mirror prior studies (e.g. Johnston et al. 2004; Johnston and Matthews 2010) and are suggestive of economic priming. Moreover, and contrary to the predictions of priming theory, these shifts occur when voters were exposed to very few activating economic messages.

It appears that Gore's fluctuations in the polls were driven, at least in part, by voters who were recalling the nation's past economic performance and rewarding Gore as a consequence, even in the absence of economic messages (i.e. it could be seen as evidence in support of the conventional economic voting model). However, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the increased correspondence is actually the result of projection, not priming. That is, the activity surrounding the conventions could have caused voters to change their economic opinion, not their vote choice. For instance, voters caught up in the excitement of the conventions may have been drawn to Gore for non-economic reasons and then, to rationalize this shift, adopted a more positive opinion

Figure 5.3: The “Correspondence” Effect, US 2000



Note: Each point is the estimated marginal effect of economic retrospections on vote choice. The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals about these estimates.

of the economy. Unfortunately, these very different effects are observationally equivalent in these tests and the apparent economic priming effects in Figure 5.3 may manifest even in the absence of priming.

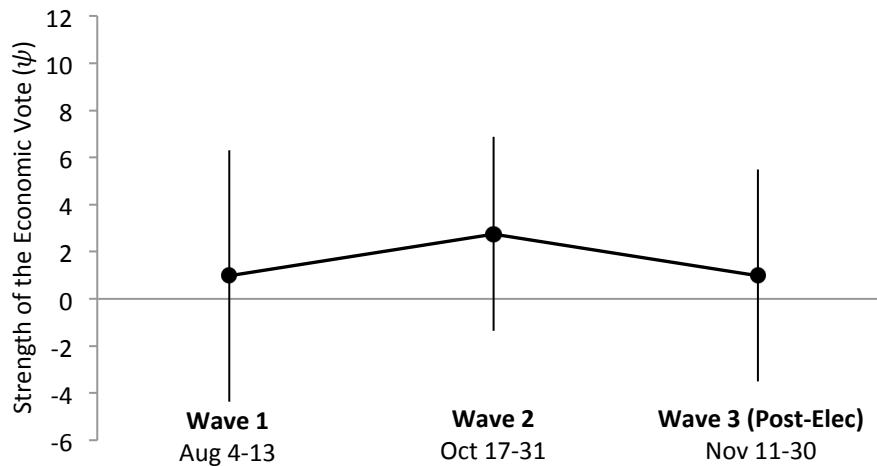
### ***A “Multi-Wave” Test of Economic Campaign Priming***

Given the insufficiency of the correspondence method, I turn to a multi-wave test of economic priming in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. This method uses panel data to evaluate whether voters are indeed changing their vote choice over time to reflect their prior economic opinion. Here I utilize three waves of data from the NAES Multiple Reinterview Panel A. Respondents who were interviewed between the party conventions (wave 1: August 4-13) were reinterviewed during the debates (wave 2: October 18-31) and again after the election (post-election: November 6-31).

In order to measure the strength of the economic vote ( $\psi_t$ ) I again regress vote choice at wave  $t$  on economic retrospections and a series of controls. Unlike in the

analysis of the correspondence effect, I use wave 1 measures of the independent variables in each model of vote choice. To isolate over-time changes in candidate support, I also control for wave 1 vote intention.<sup>79</sup> Together, these adjustments ensure that an increase in the economic vote from wave 2 to wave 3, for instance, is indicative of priming and not projection (i.e. is evidence of an inter-wave shift in vote choice, not in economic perceptions). After all, vote choice at wave 3 cannot be projected onto economic opinion at wave 2. The estimated strength of the economic vote is presented graphically in Figure 5.4. Ordered logit estimates for each panel wave are presented in the Appendix along with sparsely-specified models and models without the lagged dependent variable.

Figure 5.4: Did the US 2000 Campaign Prime the Economic Vote?



Note: Point estimates represent the strength of the economic vote at each wave. Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

The results reveal an absence of economic priming in the absence of exposure to economic campaign messages. By controlling for confounding due to projection, the

<sup>79</sup>This term is excluded by necessity in the model of wave 1 vote choice.

apparent priming effect identified in the prior section and in past studies disappears. Moreover, the lack of campaign priming is robust to alternate specification, including the removal of the lagged dependent variable.

In sum, the evidence supports the theory that the intensity of the economic campaign message moderates the strength of the economic vote. While Gore recovered twice from substantial deficits, it was not due to economic campaign priming. Contrary to the expectations of enlightened preference theory, the unfolding of the campaign in general did not activate voters' considerations of the nation's incredible prosperity.

## **MEXICO'S DEMOCRATIZING ELECTION**

On July 2, 2000, Mexican voters made international headlines by electing Vicente Fox of the center-right PAN as their president. This shift in power ended the seventy-one year dominance of the PRI and its predecessors and represented the first peaceful transition to a rival political group since Mexico's independence from Spain in 1810. Overcoming a double-digit deficit in the early stages of the campaign, Fox scored a 6-point victory over PRI nominee Francisco Labastida and outpaced perennial *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, by 26 points. The PRI's defeat came as something of a surprise to Mexicans in general and to Labastida in particular. Even as the public polls tightened, internal PRI polls projected a four-point victory for the incumbent, and bolstered the PRI standard-bearer's confidence that he would emerge on top (Dillon 2000; Bruhn 2004).

Labastida had good reason to be optimistic. For one, the PRI and its predecessors had retained its presence in Los Pinos for more than seven decades without interruption.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Los Pinos is the official residence of the Mexican president, and was actually completed in 1934, 5 years after the beginning of PRI dominance.

Plainly, the party's dominance over Mexico's opposition was more than a matter of good performance. PRI candidates did not simply offer more compelling policy platforms than their opponents and, once in office, had anything but an unblemished record. Instead the party maintained its iron grip by monopolizing political resources (Greene 2007). The PRI used its control over the extensive public bureaucracy to operate its massive patronage machine; regularly legislated changes in campaign finance regulations to deprive the opposition of vital funding; had de facto immunity to divert public funds in support of the party; and wielded the raw power of repression to stifle public dissent. These institutionalized resource asymmetries meant that opposition parties had long been competing with the PRI on anything but an even playing field. Although these advantages began to decline in the late 1970s and declined markedly throughout the 1980s and 90s, the PRI still outspent and out-advertised the competition in MX 2000 (Lujambio 2001; Moreno 2004).<sup>81</sup>

Second, from a strategic standpoint, the opposition was again at a severe disadvantage in 2000 because it was divided ideologically—primarily on economic policy—between left and right around the broadly-centrist PRI. Although expelling the PRI was at the top of the agenda for both PAN and PRD party elites, the ideological gulf

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<sup>81</sup>The PRI's declining advantage over the opposition and eventual defeat in 2000 has been the subject of much debate (see, for instance, Magaloni 2006 and the collection of essays in Domínguez and Lawson 2004). Notably, Greene (2007) argues that the PRI's adoption of the neoliberal economic model in response to the 1982 debt crisis sparked the gradual shift toward an open market for political competition. The withdrawal of the state from the private sector drastically reduced the party's access to illicit funds. Moreover, the coincident contraction of the public bureaucracy limited the patronage machine's capacity to distribute this dwindling pool of resources. As the well dried up, the PRI repeatedly revised campaign finance regulations to suit their needs, first to tie the amount of public financing to prior vote share (to favor the incumbent party) and later to cap private contributions (making "on the ground" operations more valuable). Yet, in the age of transparency, each myopic reform came with additional oversight, again reducing the PRI's access to illicit funds. Together, these changes made it possible in the long-run for opposition parties to amass sufficient resources to challenge the incumbents. Yet, from a priming-based perspective, they cannot explain Fox's victory in particular, especially in light of the growing economy and widespread support for Zedillo, without reference to the candidates' messaging decisions.

hampered efforts at coordination (including many failed proposals for a PAN-PRD opposition alliance).<sup>82</sup> As a result, regime opposition votes could be divided rather than united against the PRI nominee.

Finally, outgoing President Ernesto Zedillo's *sexenio* was widely viewed as a success. Zedillo quieted the insurgency in Chiapas, spearheaded sweeping reforms of the electoral system, and enjoyed widespread popularity—peaking at just over 60% during the campaign. The objective economic context was favorable. Zedillo stabilized the Mexican economy in the wake of the peso crash of 1994 and led a strong recovery. By the time of the election, Mexico's economy had grown steadily (around 7% annually) since 1997, and leading indicators suggested that growth would continue into the foreseeable future.

Echoing Labastida's surprise on election day, much like Al Gore's surprise in US 2000, what happened? Did voters overlook the objectively auspicious economic circumstance? Enlightened preference theory (Gelman and King 1993) argues otherwise. This psychological model undergirding conventional economic voting theory holds that Mexican voters were primed to cast an economic vote throughout the campaign. However, given that it was the opposition candidate, Vicente Fox, not the PRI standard-bearer, who surged in the polls, this argument implies that voters held, or came to hold, negative opinions of the country's past economic performance. In support of this claim, data from the four-wave Mexico 2000 Panel Study reveals that approximately half of respondents reported that the economy was doing about the same as it was in the prior year and almost 30% claimed it was doing worse.<sup>83</sup> The expectation, therefore, is that

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<sup>82</sup> For a more detailed description of these efforts at coordination, see Greene (2007, Ch. 7) and Bruhn (2004).

<sup>83</sup> Specifically, 29.2% of wave 1 (February 19-27) respondents and 31.0% of respondents in wave 4 (June 13-18) felt the economy had gotten somewhat worse or much worse in the prior year. 53.2% and 45.19%

voters' surprisingly negative retrospections became increasingly salient even if they were not exposed to economic stimuli, and this economic priming drove Fox's comeback.

Based on my priming-based approach, however, I argue that the absence of economic campaign messages in MX 2000 actually deactivated the economic vote. While Zedillo's popularity may have weighed in the minds of voters early in the campaign, Fox's slogan "*¡Ya!*" (roughly: "now" with the implication of "enough") became the mantra of a rapidly growing call for a shift in power after seven decades of rule under the PRI. The emphasis on change was reiterated by the Cárdenas campaign and, interestingly, by the PRI. Labastida distanced himself from Zedillo and sold the party as a "new PRI, closer to you." In the absence of economic campaign messages, therefore, voters did not simply align themselves on economic opinion. Instead, vote choice were made independent of retrospective evaluations.

To evaluate these competing claims, I once again begin with an analysis of the candidates' messaging strategies throughout the primary and general campaigns. Rather than recap the election in its entirety, I focus on the handling of economic issues.<sup>84</sup> I then go on to evaluate the extent to which Mexicans were primed to reassess the candidates along economic lines over the course of the campaign. Opposite the predictions of conventional economic voting theory, the results reveal that the economic vote was actually deactivated over the course of the campaign. In support of my priming-based approach, voters were not primed in the absence of economic campaign stimuli.

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reported that the economy was doing about the same as it was 12 months ago. ( $N_{w1}=2275$ ;  $N_{w4}=1115$ ).

<sup>84</sup>For a more complete account of the 2000 campaign, see, for instance: Bruhn 2004, Ortiz 2002. On the subject of advertising and the televised debates, see: Moreno 2004, Lawson 2004.

### **It's the Regime Change, Stupid!**

In July 1997, Vicente Fox announced his intentions to become the PAN nominee for president in 2000. The timing of this public declaration, well before the party opened the door for potential registrants, was decidedly unusual. Mexican presidential candidates traditionally entered the race late, reluctantly, and only under the guise that public pressures forced their hand.<sup>85</sup> Though unorthodox, Fox's timing was fortuitous for two reasons. First, a major rival, PAN party president Carlos Castillo Peraza, had just suffered an embarrassing loss to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in Mexico City's first mayoral election. Fox's declaration, therefore, signaled his desire for democratic change and his dissatisfaction with his party's traditional leadership. This solidified his reputation as a party outsider with broad appeal.<sup>86</sup>

Second, the early announcement gave Fox an enormous organizational and fundraising head start over potential primary competitors who would oppose the more centrist—especially on social issues—Guanajuato governor (Shirk 2005). Shortly after declaring his intention to run for president, Fox began promoting his candidacy and collecting resources through Amigos de Fox, an organization similar to a political action committee in American politics. This was uncommon in Mexico as candidates typically relied on the party to provide organizational and promotional resources, yet it proved to be a deft maneuver. The resounding success of Amigos in raising funds and generating popular support for Fox limited the need to appease the PAN's traditionally conservative insiders. It also frightened off any potential internal challengers, allowing Fox to earn his party's nomination unopposed. Although PAN elites considered changing the

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<sup>85</sup>This stemmed from the PRI's internal process for selecting candidates (known as *dedazo*). It was believed that the party elites did not look favorably upon public aspirations for office (Bruhn 2004).

<sup>86</sup>Fox was not the type to toe the party line. He was friendly with leftist intellectuals and leaders of the PRD, often criticized PAN leaders publicly, and threatened to leave the party and form an alliance with the PRD in 1994. He even tried once to be a Diputado for the PRI.

nomination rules to deny Fox the nomination, Fox had built such a strong following with Amigos that the “risk to PAN cohesion was bigger than the risk of accepting Fox’s maverick candidacy” (Bruhn 2004, p. 130). Rather than a death knell, then, Fox’s unorthodox strategy only reinforced his image as a new breed of candidate.

Fox’s reputation as the charismatic cowboy dovetailed perfectly with the centerpiece of his campaign message: change. The PAN candidate forwarded a democratic vision of change as an alternation in power rather than a shift in policy or ideology. In public speeches and televised ads, he focused almost exclusively on Mexico’s democratic future. With the brief exception of a brief controversy surrounding Fox’s true intention regarding the privatization of PEMEX, the economy was at no point an important part of his message. To the extent that Fox spoke about the issues at all, his promises were vague (e.g. create opportunities for everyone and tackle poverty). Yet the absence of policy specifics was intentional. Repeated tests of different change-oriented messages in focus groups led Fox’s handpicked campaign team (traditionally, the party filled these positions from within its own ranks) to the conclusion that the focus had to be on change writ large and the fact that Fox was change incarnate. Getting sucked into dry, technical debates with the more experienced Cárdenas and technocratic Labastida would only distract from his message.

Broadly speaking, two kinds of ads typify this approach. The spot “Ya” is simply an upbeat, even lighthearted, sequence of ordinary Mexican citizens calling for change by repeating Fox’s slogan, “now,” and making his trademark “V” hand signal. This symbol is a clever play on “V” for victory and represents both “V” for Vicente, and “Y” for “Ya.” The ad concludes with the only real dialogue, which translates roughly to: “the change that suits you is here. Vote Fox for president” (*Ya llegó el cambio que a ti te conviene. Vota Fox, presidente*). Interestingly, the “citizens” in the ad come from all

walks of life. Presumably, they all want different things. Yet, illustrating the amorphous nature of Fox's message of change, they all arrived at the same conclusion: Vicente Fox is the change I seek.

The second is a slight, and more serious, variant on this. "Mexico Ya" presents another series of Mexican citizens, this time united the day after the election in ecstatic celebration of Mexico's transition to democracy. Other than the concluding call to vote for Fox, the background chant of "Mexico now" (*México ya*) is the only dialogue. Again the message is change and its nebulous, emotionally-charged appeal.

Following the collapse of negotiations for a PAN-PRD coalition, the leftist PRD was faced with a difficult choice of nominating a candidate at a time when the party was riddled with internal strife. Only a consummate PRD insider like Cárdenas—the party's founder—could stand above the bitter division (Bruhn 2004: 134-135). Although he was saddled with defeat in two prior presidential elections, his impressive victory in the 1997 mayoral race in Mexico City pacified the younger factions of the PRD who were anxious for their older rivals to step aside.

Not surprisingly, Cárdenas adopted the theme of change versus more of the same as the focal point of his message. Unlike Fox, however, the idealistic Cárdenas forwarded a policy-specific, ideologically-motivated vision of change. Change meant a "real" alternation in power, not a simple change of faces. A PRD government would transform the neoliberal economic model imposed on the nation, empower women held down by moral traditionalism, and support the indigenous autonomy of Chiapas ("La alternancia real..." 2000).<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, the PRD nominee conveyed this message

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<sup>87</sup>I classify MX 2000 as an election in which the economic message was absent. Yet the implication here is that at least one of the candidates devoted considerable resources to priming the economy. However, Cárdenas said surprisingly little about the economy in his televised campaign ads and speeches (Bruhn 2004). My content analysis (this chapter) supports this assessment.

without the benefit of focus groups or extensive consultation (Aguilar Zinser 1995; Greene 2007: 238). He intuited a desire among voters for a change, particularly in the country's economic model, and believed that the masses would lead him to victory. Paradoxically, as Fox's focus groups revealed, this policy-centered message actually sublimates the importance of change writ large. The ideological charge also limited its appeal, perhaps failing to resonate with the entire range of regime opposition voters.

While it was no surprise that the opposition embraced change-oriented themes, it is something of a shock that the incumbent-party candidate would co-opt this message in support of change and against more of the same. Labastida, however, had serious credibility as a reformer. As governor of Sinaloa, he built a reputation for seeking and rooting out corruption in the party and for taking hardline stances against drug traffickers. In line with this image, Labastida offered a very different version of change from his opponents. He promised to provide change from within, calling for a "new PRI, closer to you." This rather risky strategy required that Labastida distance himself from the widely popular outgoing president, Ernesto Zedillo, and instead rely on his own status as a reformer.

Although it was not uncommon for PRI nominees to run, in part, against their predecessors, Labastida's credibility was called into serious question by his main rival in the PRI primary, Roberto Madrazo. While the first-ever primary was intended to highlight the party's pro-democracy stance (Bruhn 2004), Madrazo argued that Labastida was the favored candidate of PRI elites and had been "tapped" for the position. This bitter and public scuffle exposed a number of internal rifts and tied the eventual nominee to the PRI of old (Greene 2007). In response, Labastida had to reinforce his separation from President Zedillo and the PRI, while also convincing voters that he could change the PRI from within and that the PRI was worth changing. That is, he had to run as both

incumbent and challenger. In so doing, however, he reinforced the opposition's critiques of the PRI and further activated considerations of regime change. He also had to forego any advantage that might be gained by tethering himself to Zedillo's success. Labastida, then, said very little in his televised ads about the country's recent economic success and, to the extent that he did, his message was critical.

Labastida's eventual slogan, that "power should serve the people" (*que el poder sirva a la gente*) demonstrates the perils of this approach. On the one hand, the message supports his early claims that the PRI should do more for Mexicans in many facets of life. On the other hand, the message implies that the current PRI government is using its power to serve elite interests. He criticized the party's authoritarian history while also noting its reputation for creating order and progress. He argued that the PRI's social programs were ineffective in rural communities while claiming that his PRI would be able to deliver. He suggested, though briefly, that voters were right to be dissatisfied with the PRI's history of managing economic growth, but promised that his term in office would be different. Labastida was drowning in the duality of his message.

Following this narrative account, did the candidates, including Cárdenas, the longtime critic of the neoliberal economic model, largely ignore economic themes? To evaluate this claim empirically, I content coded over 100 campaign ads televised during the 2000 Mexican presidential election.<sup>88</sup> Specifically, I evaluated the extent to which each ad mentions economic themes. Further details about content coding are provided in the Appendix.

Based on this analysis, Table 5.2 charts the intensity of each candidate's economic campaign message. Consistent with the narrative above, the results highlight

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<sup>88</sup>Videos of the ads were collected from Vidal Romero. Unfortunately, data on these ads is extremely limited and this collection is not complete. Although there seems to be little room for interpretation in the results, my conclusions should nonetheless be viewed with this limitation in mind.

the absence of economic themes in televised ads. The economy constituted only about 12% of the total message, and this negligible number was relatively constant across the three leading candidates. Labastida led the trio slightly, making the economy the primary theme in about 7% of his ads. Interestingly—perhaps wisely given the nation’s recent economic success—the ideological Cárdenas actually said the least about Mexico’s economy. In fact, the economy was either mentioned only in passing or not at all in nearly 80% of his ads. Fox fell between these two, focusing about 12% of his rhetorical efforts on the economy. Yet, the economy took center stage in fewer Fox ads (around 3%) than in either of his competitor’s.

Table 5.2: The Candidates and the Economic Message, MX 2000

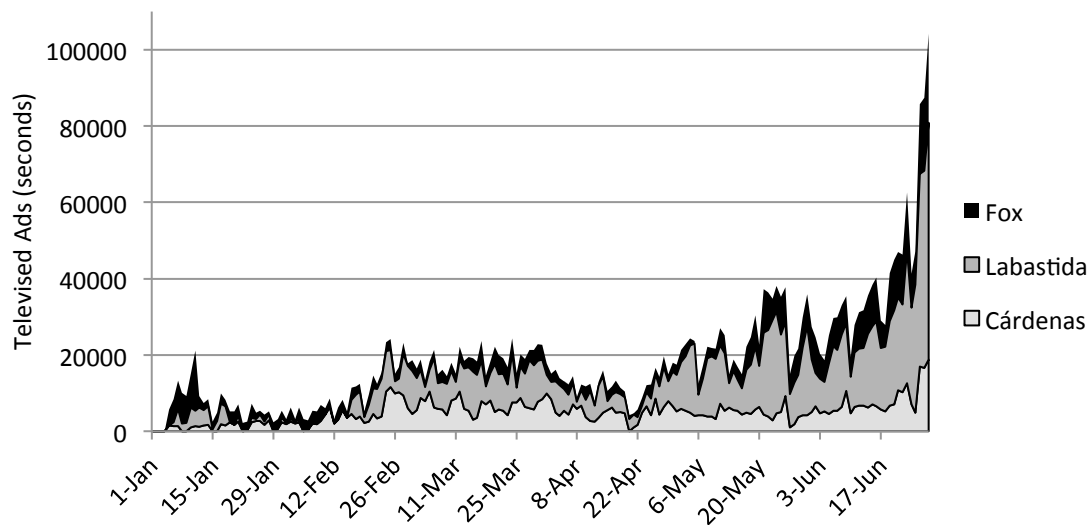
<i>Importance of the Economy in Televised Ads</i>	<u>Candidate Sponsor</u>		
	Fox	Labastida	Cárdenas
<i>Primary Theme</i>	3.1%	6.5%	4.2%
<i>Secondary/Tertiary Theme</i>	25.0%	26.1%	16.6%
<i>Unimportant/No Mention</i>	71.9%	67.4%	79.2%
<b>Overall Focus on Economy:</b>	<b>11.7%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>

Note: Figures represent the percent of ads in each category. Calculations are based on original content coding of the ads. Each ad is weighted equally.

Unfortunately, ad-frequency data is unavailable, making it impossible to evaluate the dynamics of the economic message over the course of the campaign. It is, however, worth documenting the importance of paid media in the 2000 campaign. After all, even enlightened preference theory holds that the economic vote is primed by the execution of a public campaign. Figure 5.5 makes this clear, documenting the candidates’ heavy reliance on televised campaign messages on a daily basis over six pre-election months.

Although Fox held a slight edge early on, Labastida's advertising advantage in the final months of the campaign is immediately evident, reaffirming the PRI's resource advantage. Yet the economic message constituted only about one seventh of his overall message. It is safe to say, therefore, that although the 2000 campaign played out largely in the media, voters' exposure to economic stimuli was negligible.

Figure 5.5: The Dynamics of the Campaign Message, MX 2000



Data: Beltrán (2003)

In sum, the 2000 Mexican presidential election was contested on big, abstract themes of Mexico's democratic future, not on economic issues. The election relied heavily on the use of paid media. Yet, "change vs. more of the same" was the theme of all three candidates, including Labastida, and their televised campaign messages served to promote their competing visions of change. Given that the economic vote remained

absent as the campaign intensified, the question remains: did the campaigns prime the economic vote?

### **The Disappearing Economic Vote**

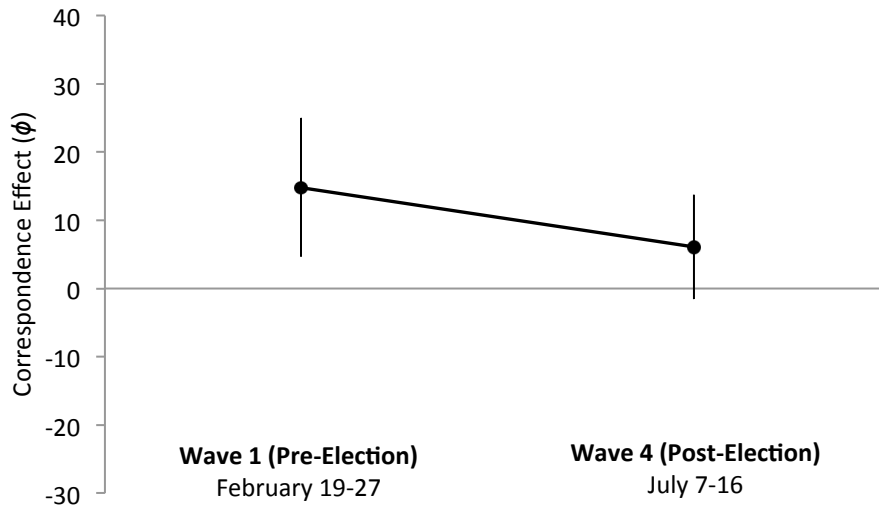
My analysis of the economic vote in MX 2000 proceeds in two parts. The first presents a test of the correspondence effect. This is the test scholars conventionally use to evaluate economic priming. However, as has been demonstrated repeatedly, this test may reveal apparent campaign priming effects even in their absence. The second section utilizes a four-wave test of the economic vote to assess the extent to which the MX 2000 campaign primed the economic vote. If conventional economic voting theory is correct, the economic vote will grow stronger through the campaign despite the dearth of economic messages. If, however, the predictions of a priming-based theory of economic voting are correct, the economic vote will not be activated.

For both phases of the analysis, I rely on data from the Mexico 2000 Panel Study. Respondents in this four-wave study were interviewed in three pre-electoral waves (wave 1: February 19-27; wave 2: April 18-May 7; wave 3: June 3-18) and one post-electoral wave (wave 4: July 7-16). In most cases, subjects were reinterviewed either for wave 2 or wave 3, but not both.

In order to evaluate the correspondence effect, I regress vote choice at wave  $t$  on economic retrospections at wave  $t$  and calculate the marginal effect on the probability of voting for the incumbent, Francisco Labastida ( $\phi_t$ ). I define vote choice (vote intention for the pre-election waves) as an unordered, categorical choice between Labastida, Fox, and Cárdenas. I also control for a respondent's party identification, policy preferences, propensity to take risks, interest in politics, gender, income, and education. Based on multinomial logit estimates of these models, Figure 5.6 depicts the correspondence effect

at panel waves 1 and 4 (respondents were not asked to reveal their economic retrospections in waves 2 or 3). Model estimates, along with detailed information about variable construction and scaling, are presented in the Appendix.

Figure 5.6: An Apparent Failure to Prime the Economic Vote, MX 2000

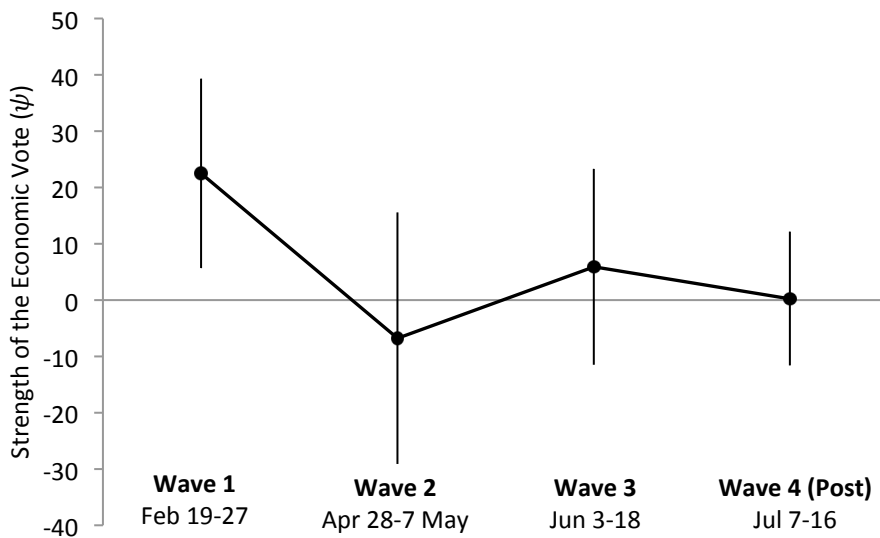


Note:  $N_{w1}=1380$ .  $N_{post}=806$ . Each point is the estimated marginal effect of economic retrospections on Labastida vote. Note that all variables are measured contemporaneously. The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals about these estimates.

The results reveal a strong tie between vote choice and opinion of Mexico's past economic performance at the outset of the general campaign ( $\phi_1 = 14.8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, contrary to the predictions of conventional economic voting theory, the size of the correspondence effect does not increase over the course of the campaign. Instead, it diminishes ( $\phi_4 = 6.1$ ,  $p = 0.11$ ). Although this effect is not statistically smaller than the wave 1 estimate, there is no doubt that the contemporaneous economy-vote link is not activated in the absence of economic campaign messages.

While it is hard to imagine that an observed decrease in the correspondence effect could mask true campaign priming, this method is nonetheless confounded by reverse causality. Therefore, I use a multi-wave test to provide unconfounded estimates in the inter-wave change in the strength of the economic vote. To do so, I estimate the same model as above for vote choice at all four waves. However, in each case, all independent variables use wave 1 measures. Also, as with US 2000, I include a lagged dependent variable to isolate the effect of prior economic opinion on the change in vote choice. Multinomial logit estimates for each model of vote choice, along with checks of robustness, are presented in the Appendix and reveal that findings are not sensitive to model specification. For ease of interpretation, Figure 5.7 depicts the strength of the economic vote ( $\psi_i$ ) at each panel wave graphically.

Figure 5.7: The Deactivation of the Economic Vote, MX 2000



Note: Point estimates represent the strength of the economic vote at each wave. Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

Corroborating the tests of the correspondence effect, the results reveal the considerable strength of the economic vote at the outset of the campaign ( $\psi_{w1} = 22.5$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Within only two months, as the campaign turned squarely to issues of regime change and democratization, the economic vote vanished. In fact, the point estimate is negative ( $\psi_{w2} = -6.8$ ), though not statistically significant ( $p = 0.55$ ). The economic vote never recovers. It remains indistinguishable from zero at both wave 3 ( $\psi_{w3} = 5.9$ ;  $p = 0.51$ ) and wave 4 ( $\psi_{w4} = 0.3$ ;  $p = 0.96$ ).

While prior studies find that economic opinion was not predictive of Wave 4 vote choice (e.g. Magaloni & Poiré 2004), these tests reveal that the economic vote was actually deactivated over the course of the 2000 Mexican presidential campaign. Counter to the predictions of conventional economic voting theory, opinions of Mexico's economic performance became less and less predictive of vote choice despite the intensification of the campaign in the plazas and on television. The evidence, however, is consistent with the predictions of my priming-based approach to economic voting. As the three candidates centered their messages on Mexico's democratic future instead of its successful economic past, Mexican voter's followed, and economic considerations became inaccessible.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I evaluated the extent to which voters were primed to evaluate candidates on economic themes in two elections where economic campaign messages were decidedly absent. These elections represent critical tests of my priming-centered theory against conventional economic voting theory. While both arguments predict economic priming when candidates focus on the economy, albeit for very different

reasons, the predictions are at odds when the candidates remain silent on the economy. If the particulars of the campaign are unimportant, as the enlightened preference theory holds, then economic priming will be evident even when voters are not exposed to economic messages. However, if economic considerations are only activated by exposure to economic stimuli, then vote choices will be made independent of economic opinion.

The evidence presented here supports my priming-centered approach handsomely. In both the 2000 U.S. and Mexican presidential elections, the candidates said little about the economy, and voters were not primed to behave as economic voters. In MX 2000, the economic vote was actually deactivated over the course of the campaign. Whether or not this explains why conventional economic voting models generate incorrect predictions in about 25% of elections worldwide is taken up in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Generalizability of the Priming-Centered Approach: Canada, South Korea, West Germany, and Historical Models**

Do candidates the world over have the capacity to activate or deactivate the economic vote strategically? In the prior chapters I found that candidates' dissemination of economic campaign messages in two U.S. and two Mexican presidential elections profoundly and systematically influenced voters' willingness to hold elected officials accountable for past economic performance. Although I have taken care in each case to isolate the impact of televised economic ads on the strength of the economic vote, some might wonder if the findings are generalizable beyond these cases. To alleviate concerns that the chosen cases inadvertently "stack the deck" in support of the priming hypothesis, the first half of this chapter evaluates the impact of economic campaign ads on the economic vote in the 2007 South Korean presidential election, the 2006 Canadian parliamentary election, and the 1972 West German Bundestag election.

I choose these cases because they complement, rather than replicate, the analysis from prior chapters. First, the Canadian and West German cases offer a chance to evaluate the priming-based approach in parliamentary elections, where the lack of a clear "attitude object" (i.e. a president) may make priming less likely. Second, the intensity of the economic campaign message varies across cases. While the 2007 Korean election focused almost exclusively on the economy (an activating campaign), the Canadian campaign focused heavily on the corruption scandals that forced the dissolution of the House of Commons (a deactivating campaign). Opposite the 2006 Mexican election, in which the candidates suddenly turned their focus to the economy, West German voters saw economic messages disappear only three weeks before the election (activating and then deactivating). Given this unusual mid-campaign shift in the economic message, I

focus more heavily on this case than the others. Third, from a practical perspective, these are some of the only national elections for which multi-wave panel data and detailed accounts of the campaign message are available.

Finally, the economic context and presence of a standing incumbent varies across these cases, offering combinations not seen in the U.S. and Mexican elections. The West German case is the first case considered thus far in which a standing incumbent won reelection in poor economic times, a scenario in which conventional economic voting theory holds that voters should be most likely to hold the government accountable for the state of the economy. The Korean election is also the first case in poor economic times without a standing incumbent. Despite the centrality of economic issues in the campaign, conventional theory argues that voters are less likely to punish the incumbent-party's nominee for the sins of his predecessor (who was directly responsible for the economy). Lastly, the 2006 Canadian election featured an incumbent party running in a period of economic stability and rapid growth. Although some have argued that the Democrats could not claim credit for the economy in the 2000 U.S. election because they did not have a standing incumbent, Canadians unceremoniously pushed out the ruling Liberals and their excellent economic record.

The analysis presented here once again supports the generalizability of a priming-based theory of economic voting. However, all of this leads back to the all-important question: so what? What have we learned about real-world political outcomes from evaluating the psychological mechanisms that condition the strength of the economic vote?

In Chapter 1, I presented what I called the “economic voting puzzle.” I demonstrated that, despite the conventionality of economic voting theory, political history is replete with examples of incumbent triumphs in bad economic times and

defeats in good economic times. In fact, the conventional model incorrectly predicts the winner in about 30% of elections in both a worldwide and U.S.-specific sample. The results classify some of the most consequential elections in recent decades as anomalous. Can a model that accounts for the centrality of the economic message in the campaign discourse do any better? The second half of this chapter compares the performance of the priming-based model of economic voting developed throughout the dissertation against the conventional model. I find that the priming model not only explains variation in the strength of the economic vote across elections (regardless of activation or deactivation within the election) but also generates more accurate election predictions.

#### **“BULLDOZING” THE ECONOMIC VOTE: SOUTH KOREA, 2007**

In just the fourth presidential contest since South Korea’s democratizing election of 1987, conservative Grand National Party (GNP) challenger Lee Myung-bak defeated the ruling United Democratic Party’s (UNDP) nominee Chung Dong-young by the largest margin in Korea’s brief history with democracy. Lee, the youngest-ever CEO in the Hyundai Group and former Seoul mayor, became the first conservative president in a decade despite record low turnout and an unusually dull campaign. Korean elections of the past were notoriously close, bruising battles in which candidates stoked both longstanding regional rivalries and popular emotions over tenuous relations with North Korea and the United States. Yet, as the parties began their respective primaries in 2007, the outcome of the December 17 general election seemed in little doubt.

Following the miraculous economic growth and industrialization that characterized the 1980s and 90s, Korea had fallen into an economic malaise. Growth stalled. Housing prices soared. Youth unemployment was rising rapidly, and small

businesses were struggling to stay afloat. Against a rising tide of public discontent, President Roh Moo-hyun—who had been elected in 2002 on a platform of social egalitarianism, continued rapprochement with North Korea, and antipathy towards the U.S.—appeared out of touch. Roh’s efforts to constrain real estate speculation, for instance, drove housing prices even higher. Stuck between the booming high tech Japanese economy and the booming low cost Chinese economy, public fears about Korea’s economy were almost palpable (Onishi 2007b).

Looking to capitalize on widespread concern, Lee focused his message squarely on the economy. He attacked President Roh’s economic stewardship ferociously, arguing that the UNDP administration had created an anti-business climate. Against this picture of incompetence, Lee portrayed himself as the only man who could reverse the trend. Nicknamed “The Bulldozer” for his take-charge, hard-working persona, Lee—like Vicente Fox in the 2000 Mexican election—emphasized his roots as a self-made man who rose from modest beginnings to the top of the largest business conglomerate in the country. He highlighted his record as mayor of Seoul, especially his successful quality-of-life initiatives throughout the city. He promised to lower taxes, double the average family income, increase annual GDP growth to 7%, and make Korea the seventh largest economy in the world. Surprisingly, this was only the second “CEO-style” campaign of its kind in Korea’s democratic Third Republic.<sup>89</sup>

Not even the late emergence of a corruption scandal could derail Lee’s economic message. Less than two months before Election Day, accusations emerged that the GNP candidate illegally manipulated stock prices for a company called BBK, which he

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<sup>89</sup> In 1992, the founder of Hyundai, Chung Ju-yung made a run for president as an outsider candidate. He emphasized his background as a businessman. Yet he earned only 16% of the vote as the major candidates focused on the issues of government transparency, elections at the local level, and minority rights (Lee 2011).

allegedly helped found. Although an official investigation cleared Lee of the charges, the case was reopened just days before the election when a video emerged in which Lee appeared to contradict his testimony in the case. This was not the first time that Lee had been accused of economic or political wrongdoing. Most notably, Lee was forced to resign as a member of the Korean National Assembly in 1998 for violating campaign finance laws. However, like Clinton's response to the Gennifer Flowers scandal, Lee doubled down on his economic message. Press reports suggested that voters, as in the 1992 U.S. election, responded to the charges with indifference, siding with a competent, if slightly corrupt, leader over an incompetent one (Onishi 2007c).

Given Lee's reputation as a successful businessman and popular frustration with the UNDP, my priming-based theory of economic voting would expect that the "activating" campaign of 2007 primed Koreans to hold UNDP nominee Chung responsible for the party's past performance. However, two factors could have blocked the GNP standard-bearer's path to the Blue House: North Korea and regionalism. In fact, numerous studies suggest that, although support for the military governments varied with economic performance (Byung 1988), voters' almost singular focus on these issues in the democratic era snuffed out any pattern of economic voting (e.g. Lee 1998; Lee 2011).

Tensions between North and South Korea could always erupt in a way that monopolizes public attention in the blink of an eye. Although the UNDP's "Sunshine Policy" was beginning to ease relations between the two countries, a summit between President Roh and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il was scheduled in October, 2007. This was the first meeting between the divided countries since 2000, when President Kim Dae-jung organized an historic and highly emotional summit in Pyongyang to begin détente with the communist North. While the 2007 summit led to a series of new agreements between the neighboring countries, public interest was low (Onishi 2007a).

Moreover, the conservative GNP no longer challenged the policy of direct engagement with the North. Although Lee argued that he would be more vocal in his criticism of North Korea's human rights violations and nuclear armament, he would not pursue the prior policy of regime change (Onishi 2007d).<sup>90</sup>

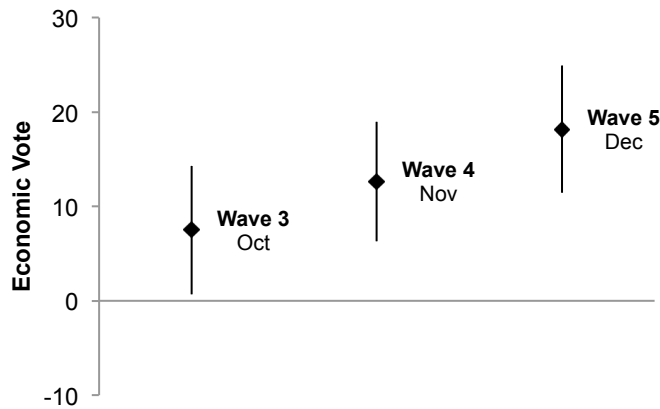
Similarly, the historic rivalry between the Honam and Youngnam provinces is so prominent that regionalism is one of the most important determinants of Korean political behavior (e.g. Min 2010, 2011). Overpowering party identification in Korean elections (Lee & Glasure 1995), voters tend to support their regional candidates. In 2002, Honam voters cast almost 94% of their ballots for Roh Moo-hyun. If voters held on to these traditional divides, or if the candidates activated them, vote choices could remain unrelated to economic evaluations despite Lee's efforts to prime the economic vote.

I evaluate the extent to which the economic vote was primed over the course of this “activating” election using data from the 2007 South Korean Presidential Election Panel Study. Following the method for analyzing panel data developed throughout this dissertation, I regress vote intention for UNDP candidate Chung Dong-young on economic retrospections, prior vote choice, and a series of control variables. Because of the timing of the surveys and the items in each survey, I analyze four waves of data from the six-wave study. These waves span the final four months of the campaign, including the primary selections. Detailed information about variable coding and model estimates are presented in the Appendix. Figure 6.1 charts the strength of the economic vote based on logistic estimates of the “full” model of incumbent-vote intention.

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<sup>90</sup>Interestingly, this move to the center actually cost Lee his national majority. Former GNP conservative Lee Hoi-chang broke from the party in 2007 and ran as an independent. He earned almost 16% of the national vote.

Figure 6.1: Economic Activation in the 2007 South Korean Election



Note: Estimates of the economic vote are based on logit estimates of a model of vote choice for or against the ruling UNDP. N=1,911.

Consistent with a priming-based theory of economic voting, the results show a steady and marked increase over the campaign in voters' willingness to hold the UNDP accountable for past economic performance. As Lee Myung-bak attacked the UNDP's economic stewardship and painted himself as the businessman ready to put Korea back to work, voters followed. This was true despite the absence of economic voting in prior Korean elections, including the 1997 election in the midst of the Asian economic collapse. This last point is important, as the pattern of economic priming observed in Figure 6.1 is also consistent with the predictions of the conventional economic voting model. "Enlightened preferences," however, cannot explain why Korean voters routinely turned to opinions about North Korean engagement and deeply rooted regional identities instead of economic retrospections prior to 2007. By contrast, I argue that Lee's historic economic appeal—coupled with his moderation on North Korea—accounts for the sudden appearance of performance voting in Korea's new democracy.

## **IT'S THE SCANDALS, STUPID: CANADA, 2006**

Stephen Harper's fledgling Conservative Party of Canada successfully and surprisingly eked out a narrow plurality of seats in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. His ensuing minority government relegated the Liberals to the role of opposition for the first time in thirteen years and only the sixth time since World War I. Contrary to the predictions of conventional economic voting theory, the election occurred during a long period of stable economic growth, low unemployment, and large budget surpluses. However, as I detail in this section, the 2006 election also came at the end of a tumultuous three-year period in which the Liberal government faced a litany of serious corruption charges, charges which came to dominate the campaign discourse. Did the focus on non-economic themes dampen the economic vote, or did voters turn automatically to economic considerations when evaluating the Liberal government?

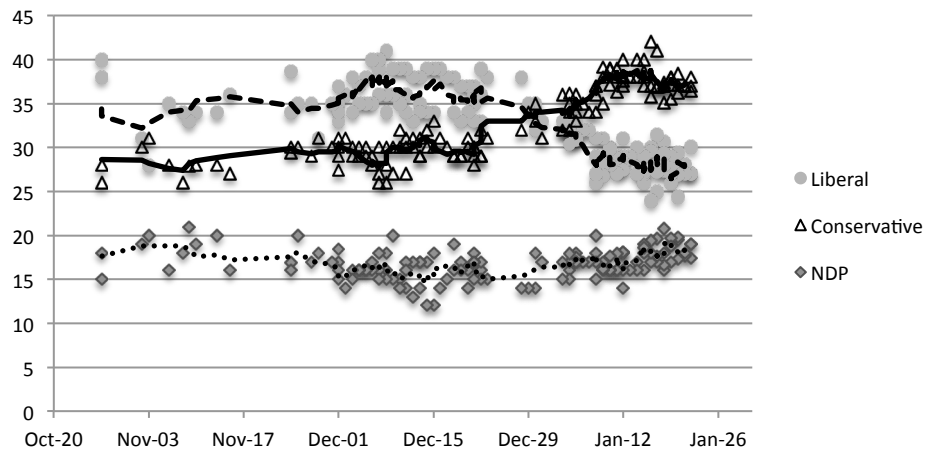
Although Harper's Conservatives failed to topple the scandal-ridden Liberals in 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin's minority government lasted only seventeen months in office. A former Finance Minister, Martin was chosen by his party in 2003 to replace then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien who had been forced to resign after the Auditor General revealed that the Liberals were running a massive kickback and money-laundering scheme to counter the separatist movement in Quebec. Martin survived the election in the wake of this "sponsorship" scandal largely by condemning his party's corruption and attacking the ideological Harper as a radical conservative in the mold of George W. Bush. Yet Martin's narrow plurality in the House of Commons could not outlast the release in late 2005 of the first report from a federal inquiry into the sponsorship scandal. The Gomery Commission's report detailed how the Liberal leadership used phony contracts with an advertising agency in Quebec to funnel millions of public dollars into the coffers of local party leaders. One month later, the three

opposition parties, including the Conservatives, voted to bring down a government they held to be corrupt.

Many thought the ensuing election might play out as it had in 2004 when Martin's Liberals held off the Conservative charge (Krauss 2006). Harper, however, surprised many in 2006. He shied away from hot-button issues like abortion, gay marriage, the war in Iraq, and the Kyoto climate protocol that hurt his party in 2004 (Clarke et al. 2006). The evolving candidate also moderated his stated ambitions to rein in and reshape the federal government (Coyne 2006). Instead, he used the first three weeks of the unusually long eight-week campaign to lay out his plans to reduce the national Goods and Sales Tax by 2%, increase subsidies for childcare, root out corruption, and keep Canadian troops out of Iraq. These modest proposals helped define and moderate the largely unknown Conservative Party. However, they failed to highlight the corruption scandals that prompted the campaign as a central issue.

Martin, who one journalist described as "uncharismatic even by Canada's undemanding standards" ("Canada Tilts..." 2006), emphasized the economic successes of the Liberal government and announced plans to ban handguns and overhaul the federal childcare program. However, just as his campaign was gaining steam, new corruption allegations emerged. In late December, just three weeks before the election, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced that they were investigating Finance Minister Ralph Goodale on charges of insider trading. As seen in Figure 6.2, the small Liberal lead to this point in the election evaporated quickly in the wake of the revelation and as the candidates scrambled to address the scandal.

Figure 6.2: “Poll of Polls” in the 2006 Canadian Election



Note: Lines are 5-period moving averages of each series of poll results.

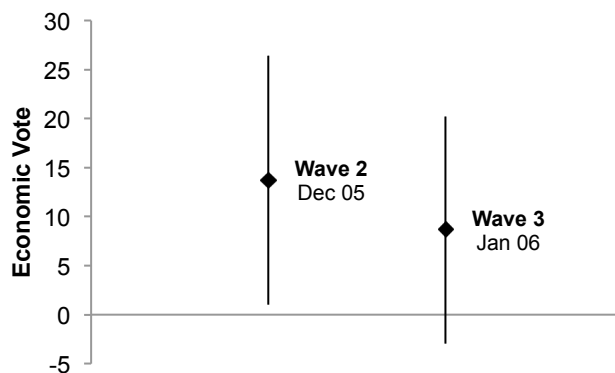
Although Harper never turned away from his “plain vanilla” policy proposals, he responded by amplifying his focus on the need to clean up corruption. Martin, however, realized that the public eye was turning again to perceptions of Liberal lawlessness and made a sudden change. Following his playbook from 2004, Martin went negative. The callous attacks, unusual in Canadian politics, painted Harper as a puppet of George W. Bush who would gut health care and send troops to Iraq. In one ad, Martin claims “A Harper victory will put a smile on George W. Bush’s face. Well, at least someone will be happy, eh?” Unlike 2004, however, Harper had already defined himself as a moderate. Looking to capitalize on the public shift away from Martin’s party, Jack Layton’s National Democratic Party made a strategic appeal to voters who wanted to clean up the government, but wanted a strong leftist presence in Ottawa.

In the end, the Conservatives gained just enough seats to form a minority government. Although the Liberals made an early effort to focus on their economic successes, they quickly changed course in response to the untimely announcement of yet

another corruption scandal and Harper’s surprising decision to toe a moderate line. As such, Canadian voters were exposed to very little in the way of economic stimuli.

To evaluate the extent of economic priming during this “deactivating” case, I use data from three waves of the 2004 and 2006 Canadian Election Studies. Respondents in this study were interviewed before and after the 2004 and 2006 elections. Here I use the 2004 post-election wave as the baseline against the 2006 campaign-period and post-election waves. Again, using the method developed throughout this dissertation to evaluate economic priming in an unconfounded way, I regress vote choice for or against the Liberal party on prior vote choice, prior economic retrospections, and a series of controls. Logistic estimates of this model, along with information on variable coding and estimates of a “sparse” model, are provided in the Appendix. Figure 6.3 charts the results.

Figure 6.3: Deactivating the Economic Vote, Canada 2006



Note: Estimates of the economic vote are based on logit estimates of a model of vote choice for or against the ruling Liberal party. N=314.

If conventional economic voting theory is correct, the strength of the economic vote should increase substantially during this period regardless of the muted economic

message. The results, however, reveal that economic retrospections became less predictive of voting behavior over the course of the campaign. Interestingly, the change in support for the Liberals between the 2004 and 2006 campaign was strongly related to economic opinion. Yet, as the campaign message shifted in the wake of the insider trading scandal—just after the Wave 2 interview—economic retrospections had no influence on vote choice.

As with the 2000 Mexican and U.S. presidential elections, the analysis from the 2006 Canadian parliamentary election reveals that voters do not come to evaluate the incumbent party based on economic criteria in the absence of exposure to economic stimuli. If, as in this case, the candidates define the election in non-economic terms, the voters follow. The fact that the government's economic record is rarely a central campaign issue may explain why numerous studies conclude that Canadian elections are more about policy issues than performance (Blais et al. 2004; Monroe and Erickson 1986; Clarke and Zuk 1987; alternatively: Happy 1989). For instance, economic opinions did not influence vote choice in the scandal-racked contest of 2004 (e.g. Gidengil et al. 2006). The notable exception may be the 1993 election in which the Progressive Conservatives lost one of the most lopsided elections in Western history—retaining only 2 of 156 seats—after the economic recession of the late 1980s. Not surprisingly, the economy was the primary issue in the campaign. Although panel data are unavailable in these contests, the generalizability of the priming-centered approach to economic voting is becoming clear. This is also true of the power of candidates to activate or deactivate the economic vote strategically. Before turning to the predictive power of a campaign-centered model, I turn to the very difficult test of the 1972 West German elections.

## **A SUDDEN SWITCH TO DEACTIVATION: WEST GERMANY, 1972**

The 1972 Bundestag elections came one year ahead of schedule. A series of deft political maneuvers in the wake of the 1969 elections to propel two minority parties to power, a radical new policy to normalize relations with the Communist East, and subversive meddling by East German Stasi spies all led to the first use of a vote of no confidence to force new elections. In an intensely polarized campaign that saw unprecedented popular engagement and the emergence of television as a primary tool of communication, the governing alliance between Chancellor Willy Brandt's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the classically liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) defeated Rainer Barzel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), despite widespread concern about rapidly rising inflation. This marked the first time since World War II that German voters gave a clear majority in the Bundestag to a center-left government.

Beyond the inherent intrigue of a political campaign in a time of incredible political and societal flux, the 1972 West German campaign represents something of a "critical" case for this dissertation. As I detail below, an intense discussion over rising price inflation under the Brandt government dominated the first month of the campaign. Yet the economic message nearly vanished less than one month before Election Day when Willy Brandt announced the signing of the Basic Treaty, which officially recognized East Germany as a sovereign state, made several large economic concessions to its Communist neighbor, and set the stage for increased trade and more frequent visitation between German families separated by the postwar division. The fight to define Brandt's economic record changed almost instantly into an ideological battle over his increasingly popular *Neue Ostpolitik* (new policy toward the East). Although this shift in rhetoric was caused by a policy decision, Brandt's choice to expedite negotiations

was strategic and did in fact change the message. In this way, the 1972 Bundestag election is the converse of the 2006 Mexican presidential election, in which economic messages suddenly came to prominence, and serves as an excellent point of comparison to the deactivating 2000 U.S. and Mexican presidential elections, in which economic themes were never prominent.

### ***Ostpolitik* and the Rise of German Cosmopolitanism**

In the two decades following the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, Konrad Adenauer's CDU dominated West German politics (typically as a majority coalition with the FDP). The widely popular conservative Chancellor led the effort to rebuild a country left in shambles, helped create the "social market economy," and presided over the West German "economic miracle." Even after Adenauer's retirement from politics in 1963, the CDU remained the party of Adenauer, especially in regards to diplomatic relations with East Germany and the rest of the Communist world. Holding the West German state to be the rightful representative of the entire, albeit temporarily divided, German nation,<sup>91</sup> the Adenauer government refused to establish or maintain diplomatic ties with any country that recognized East Germany as a separate, sovereign German state.<sup>92</sup> Referred to as the Hallstein Doctrine, this "cold" policy eventually led to the cessation of ties with both Yugoslavia and Cuba.

In 1969, however, the Christian Democrats assumed the role of opposition for the first time in West Germany's brief history. Although the CDU earned a plurality of seats

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<sup>91</sup>Adenauer's insistence on this *de jure* exclusive mandate for all of Germany was a response to Article 23 of the West German "Basic Law," which declares the East-West division to be a temporary one and sets in place a means for the East German states to accede. In the drafting of the "Basic Law" to create a separate West German state at the behest of the Western Allies, West Germany refused to acknowledge the German Democratic Republic as a separate German state (the Allies reluctantly conceded the point). Even the name "Basic Law" (instead of Constitution) is symbolic of the belief in the temporary division between East and West.

<sup>92</sup>The lone exception was the Soviet Union because of their position as an occupying power.

in the Bundestag, the SPD and FDP had just enough seats to form a government under the leadership of former West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt. This savvy, post-election maneuver surprised the CDU, who had governed with the SPD since 1966 in a “Grand Coalition.” Yet Brandt broke from the CDU to form an alliance with the FDP’s young leader, Walter Scheel. This social-liberal alliance formed to break from the CDU’s isolationist stance and pursue a policy of reconciliation through rapprochement with East Germany and much of the Eastern Bloc.<sup>93</sup> Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* took off in earnest in 1970 with the negotiation and signing of the Treaties of Moscow and Warsaw. The treaties gave *de facto* recognition to East Germany and acknowledged the Oder-Neisse Line as the official border between Germany and Poland.

Although Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971, his policy of Détente earned him political enemies at home. The abandonment of Germany’s claim to the lands east of the Oder and Lasatian Neisse rivers—which Poland annexed in the drawing of the postwar borders in part as reparation for the Polish land annexed by the Soviet Union—was especially controversial.<sup>94</sup> In protest, members of the governing coalition in the Bundestag began defecting to the CDU opposition. From 1970 to 1972, five members of the FDP and one member of the SPD left the governing parties (four joined with the CDU and two simply abandoned the FDP Fraktion).<sup>95</sup> Realizing that Chancellor Brandt’s majority was lost, Rainer Barzel attempted on April 27, 1972 to elevate himself as Chancellor of a new CDU government. He did so by initiating a

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<sup>93</sup>By 1969, it was becoming clear that the Hallstein Doctrine was untenable. In fact, the CDU established ties with both Yugoslavia and Romania, arguing that they were coerced into recognizing East Germany. This shift arguably set the stage for further reforms (Haftendorn 2006).

<sup>94</sup>The issue was sensitive for two reasons. First, large German populations were officially separated from the homeland after the annexation of the lands east of the Oder-Neisse Line. Second, it was known that Soviet forces had brutalized German families in this territory, making the concessions look like a sign of forgiveness.

<sup>95</sup>Karl Schiller, the SPD Minister of Economics and Finance, would also leave the SPD in late 1972. However, he did so primarily for economic reasons.

“constructive vote of no confidence.” Under Article 67 of the Basic Law, the parliament can withdraw support for the government without forcing new elections only if there is majority support for a successor as Chancellor. Despite having the numbers to elect Barzel, he suspiciously failed by two votes. Although the ballots were anonymous, it was later discovered that Stasi agents bribed CDU members to abstain from the vote and keep Brandt in power.

Despite Barzel’s failure, the parliament was deadlocked at 248:248 and Brandt was forced to call early elections. However, the upcoming Summer Olympics in Munich allowed Brandt to delay the dissolution of the Bundestag until the fall. Finally, on September 22, Brandt intentionally lost a vote of no confidence, and elections were scheduled for November 22, 1972.

In the midst of this political turmoil, the West German electorate was also undergoing several noteworthy changes. First, mirroring the Women’s Movement throughout the western world, West German women were moving out of traditional roles in the home and into the modern workplace. They increasingly disavowed the notion of politics as a “man’s business” and were becoming more engaged in the political process. Subsequently, their stalwart allegiance to the traditional values of the CDU waned. By 1972, the massive “gender gap” in support for the CDU (i.e. the level of CDU support among women versus men) had vanished (Rusciano 1992). Second, the voting age had been lowered in 1970, making the 1972 election the first opportunity for West Germans between the age of 18 and 23 to vote. This new and sizable percentage of the electorate represented the first generation of voters born and raised in postwar Germany. Finally, Germans were becoming less parochial. Religious affiliation was becoming less predictive of vote choice (e.g. Conradt and Lambert, 1974). In particular, the Christian Democrats could no longer count on full support from West German Catholics, especially

white-collar Catholics and Catholic industrial workers (e.g. Klingemann and Pappi, 1970). In conjunction with the controversy surrounding *Ostpolitik*, this cosmopolitan shift set the stage for an unusually close and polarized electoral contest.

### **Arrested Activation and the 1972 Campaign**

The FDP and SPD announced their intention to continue their alliance in advance of the 1972 election, leaving West German voters a clear choice between Brandt and Barzel as Chancellor. Barzel faced an uphill battle. Brandt was more charismatic than the relatively unknown and technocratic Barzel and, as a Nobel recipient, a source of pride for many Germans. Moreover, the parochial CDU had done little to adjust its image as the party of Adenauer during its time in opposition (Bernstorff, 1972). CDU opposition to *Ostpolitik* remained fierce despite clear evidence that public support for normalized relations with the East was widespread (Conradt and Labert, 1974). Astutely realizing that an all-out attack on *Ostpolitik* would prove to be an ineffective campaign strategy, however, Barzel goaded his party into ratifying the Treaties of Moscow and Warsaw in the spring of 1972 and quieted their public discontent. The absence of major CDU protest against *Ostpolitik* during the campaign was surprising to many (“No Fight...” 1972). Instead, the clever Barzel turned to rising prices and economic stability as his trump cards for the campaign (Laux 1973).

As Election Day approached, the annual rate of inflation neared 7%. Although this may not seem like much in an historical context, memories of the hyperinflationary inter-war period remained etched into West German minds. In fact, around 95% of West Germans identified rising prices as an important issue at the time of the campaign. In response, Barzel hit hard at the SPD’s economic record and stoked fears that inflation would continue to rise under a social-liberal government. He pushed voters to compare

Brandt's performance against the incredible growth and stability achieved under the CDU's social market economy. The only path that would lead back to stability, he concluded, was a return to CDU rule.

Brandt and the SPD responded by arguing that inflation was the result of West Germany's embeddedness within the international market (Bernstorff 1972). Brandt noted that inflation in surrounding countries was much worse. He also pointed to increases in West German wages and blamed some of the price increase on newly instituted tobacco taxes. The SPD also attempted to ride Brandt's popularity and turn the election into a personal contest. Brandt portrayed himself as a compassionate man, but not a socialist (Binder 1972a), and set himself in contrast to the technocratic Barzel.

These communication strategies took on new importance in 1972 because of the rise of television as a campaign tool. For the first time, the major party candidates were given two and a half minutes every day after the evening news to put across their message. Also for the first time, candidates were invited to participate in three televised debates. The capacity to reach large audiences through daily televised communication allowed candidates to respond quickly to one another. It also meant that the tenor, tone, and focus of the campaign discourse could change almost instantly.

On November 5, just two weeks before the election, Chancellor Willy Brandt announced that he had completed negotiations of the "Basic Treaty" with East Germany. This came as a surprise. Brandt had announced previously that negotiations would likely finish after the vote. With complicity from the East Germans, however, the meetings were fast-tracked. As a result of this reelection-minded policy decision, the campaign changed overnight. The televised debates, particularly the last two, became an opportunity for Brandt to tout his foreign policy successes and challenge the CDU to take stances against a policy of *Détente*. In fact, foreign policy dominated the debate

dialogue, receiving more than twice as many mentions as economic issues (Baker and Norpoth 1981). To top it all off, images of reunited German families began appearing in the press in the days before the election.

When the signing of the Basic Treaty was announced, a crestfallen Barzel came out in opposition, arguing that he would renegotiate the terms of the agreement if elected. He did so reluctantly, recognizing that the discourse had suddenly turned toward a referendum on *Ostpolitik* that he was unlikely to win (Binder 1972b, 1972c). Barzel and the CDU/CSU responded by taking a turn to the right. CSU leader and conservative firebrand Franz Josef Strauss began raising fears, especially among farmers, about collectivization of land and further concessions to the Communist Bloc under the SPD (Binder 1972d; Bernstorff 1972). Ads funded by worried German entrepreneurs labeled Brandt a dangerous Socialist.<sup>96</sup> Discussions about inflation and stability, which dominated the early stage of the campaign, fell largely to the wayside. In the end, Brandt and Scheel won an outright majority in the Bundestag, relegating the CDU to the role of opposition once again.

### **Did the Shift away from Inflation Deactivate the Economic Vote?**

With respect to activating elections, I have argued that analysis of economic priming requires multi-wave panel data. Ideally, the interviews should be spaced out such that the economy became salient between the second and third waves of the study. Here, the opposite is true—the economy should decrease in salience between the second and third waves. Fortuitously, the second wave of the three-wave German Election Panel Study of 1972 concluded on November 6, just one day after Brandt announces that the

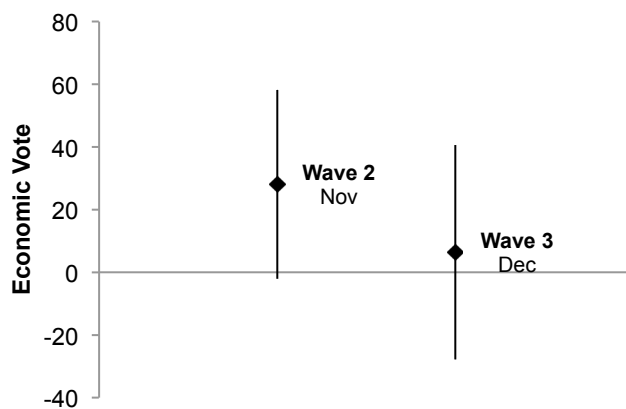
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<sup>96</sup>Interestingly, the SPD did not “take the bait,” so to speak, in response to these accusations (i.e. they were not compelled to respond by making a public and spirited defense of socialism that would pull them to the left). Even the far-left Young Socialists maintained a sort of quiet approval of Brandt’s hardly-socialist agenda (Conradt and Lambert 1974).

Basic Treaty is nearing completion. If my priming-based theory of economic voting is correct, I expect to find, first, that voters were primed to evaluate the parties based on economic considerations in the first month of the campaign. Second, I expect that economic retrospections had no influence on voters' evaluations of the parties after the disappearance of the economic message. If conventional economic voting theory is correct, by contrast, economic priming will be evident in both campaign periods.

To evaluate these competing claims, I use the method utilized throughout this dissertation to assess the change in the strength of the economic vote over the course of the 1972 Bundestag campaign. Namely, I regress vote choice at each wave on prior vote choice, prior evaluations of national economic performance, and a series of control variables. Logit estimates of these models and detailed description of variable coding are presented in the Appendix. Figure 6.4 displays the estimates of the economic vote.

Figure 6.4: The Disappearance of Economic Priming, West Germany 1972



Note: Estimates of the economic vote are based on logit estimates of a model of vote choice for or against the ruling SPD/FDP coalition. N=910.

The results show that voters were indeed primed to evaluate Brandt's coalition with the FDP based on their stewardship of the West German economy during the first month of the campaign. However, after the signing of the Basic Treaty and the near disappearance of the economic message, a voter's economic opinion had no influence on her evaluation of the parties. This finding is consistent with a priming-based approach to economic voting, and, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the decline occurred only after the campaign turned into a debate over the Basic Treaty. Also, as expected, the pattern is the opposite of the one identified in the analysis of the 2006 Mexican presidential election. Here the intensity of the economic message plummeted suddenly and voters responded by turning their attention away from the economy.

Notably, this drop in the economic vote occurred in an election with a standing incumbent and where fears of rapidly rising inflation were widespread. Both the "clarity of responsibility" hypothesis and the "enlightened preference" model argue that this is the least likely scenario to observe a weak economic vote, let alone the deactivation of the economic vote. Once again the empirical evidence points to the power of political leaders, not political institutions or external economic forces, to condition voters' willingness to hold elected officials accountable for the state of the economy.

#### **AGGREGATE-LEVEL TESTS OF THE PRIMING-BASED MODEL**

These empirical results, as well as those presented in prior chapters, highlight the insufficiency of the conventional economic voting model. Specifically, they demonstrate that extant theory incorrectly specifies the psychological mechanism that links economic retrospections to voting behavior. Although identifying this limitation may be an important theoretical contribution, what is the value of bringing the priming approach to

economic voting theory? To what extent does paying careful attention to campaign strategy and political communication improve our understanding of electoral outcomes?

In this section I evaluate the “utility” of a priming-based approach to economic voting relative to the conventional model. I do so in two ways. First, I assess the capacity of a priming-based model to explain over-time variation in the strength of the economic vote, rather than within-campaign variation. Second, I compare predicted elections outcomes derived from a priming-based model against those derived from a conventional model. These are the most appropriate points of comparison because economic voting models are employed most frequently to these ends.

### **Variation in the Economic Vote across Elections**

I have shown that economic retrospections become more or less predictive of vote choices in response to candidates’ strategic decisions to alter their focus on economic issues in televised campaign ads. Can a priming-based model also explain variation in the economic vote across elections? Is economic voting more prevalent in elections in which the economic message is the focus of the campaign dialogue and less prevalent in elections in which the candidates say little of economic issues?

I answer these questions using individual-level public opinion data from the American National Election Study (ANES) for presidential elections from 1980 to 2000. I choose this series for two reasons. First, it is one of the longest continuous series of election studies available for any country. Second, the U.S. is a tough test of the priming model because strong party identification and relatively balanced campaign efforts make campaign effects unlikely.

To evaluate the impact of economic messages on the strength of the economic vote in these elections, I regress vote choice from each election – for or against the

incumbent-party candidate – on economic retrospections, a measure of the intensity of the economic campaign message in that election, and an interaction between the two. I construct the measure of the economic campaign message using Vavreck's (2009) coding of economic appeals in televised campaign ads. I code each election as a low, medium, or high intensity economic campaign based on the number of candidates who focused heavily on the economy (i.e. more than 40% of the candidate's ads feature economic appeals). If the priming approach can explain patterns of economic voting across elections, the estimated coefficient for the interaction between economic opinion and the economic message will be positive and statistically significant.

Before presenting the results, it is worth noting briefly that my estimation strategy in this section differs from the one used throughout this dissertation. This is because it is no longer my aim to identify economic priming *per se*. Instead, having identified the mechanism that drives economic voting, my aim here is to see if the basic priming logic can account for fluctuations in the relationship between economic opinion and vote choices across elections. With this in mind, logistic estimates of this model, including controls for party identification and attention to politics, are presented below in Table 6.1.

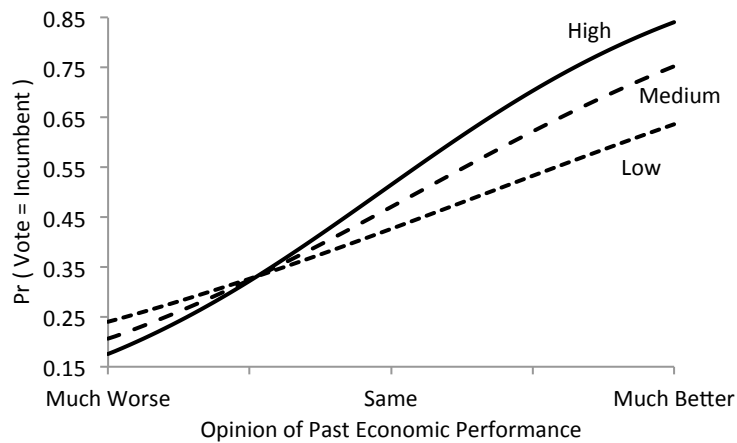
As expected, the estimated coefficient for the interaction between economic retrospections and the intensity of the economic message in each campaign is significant at  $p=0.01$ . Economic voting, therefore, is most prevalent when candidates focus on economic issues. A visual depiction of this finding, Figure 6.5 displays the predicted probability of voting for the incumbent-party candidate over the range of economic opinions in campaigns with low, medium, and high exposure to televised campaign ads. The slope of each probability curve represents the strength of the economic vote. Steeper curves indicate that vote choice is more sensitive to economic opinion. As predicted by the priming-based approach, the strength of the economic vote (i.e. the slope of the

Table 6.1: Economic Priming in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1980 – 2000

	DV = Vote Choice (Incumbent/Challenger)
<i>Economic Retrospection</i>	0.428*** (0.054)
<i>Intensity of the Economic Campaign Message</i>	-0.386*** (0.123)
<i>Economic Retrospection * Economic Message</i>	0.188*** (0.041)
<i>Party ID: In-partisan</i>	1.719*** (0.092)
<i>Party ID: Out-partisan</i>	-1.598*** (0.097)
<i>Attention to Politics</i>	-0.225** (0.098)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.536*** (0.196)
<i>Observations</i>	8,491
<i>Pseudo R-Squared</i>	0.391

Note: Logistic estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Figure 6.5: The Economic Vote in the U.S. by the Intensity of the Economic Campaign, 1980-2000



Note: Lines represent the predicted probability of voting for the incumbent-party candidate. “Low,” “Medium,” and “High” refer to the focus of the campaign on economic themes in 2000, in 1980 and 1996, and in 1984, 1988 and 1992 respectively.

curve) increases with the intensity of the economic message. Therefore, the priming approach successfully models cross-election variation in the strength of the economic vote without reference to institutional arrangements, incumbency status, or the partisan composition of the legislature—as is common in the clarity of responsibility literature.

### **Predicting Election Outcomes**

Does a priming-based model of economic voting provide a more accurate account of election outcomes than the existing model? In Chapter 1, I found that the conventional economic voting model incorrectly predicts election outcomes in almost 30% of elections. This is true worldwide as well as in U.S. contests, where the conventional model ought to perform at its best. Despite these errors, modeling the incumbent party's vote total over time is the “bread-and-butter” application of economic voting theory. One might reasonably wonder if introducing measures of the economic message into a model of economic voting is worth the trouble of collecting the data. If not, scholars may simply note the importance of campaign messages within campaigns and continue modeling election outcomes based strictly on economic context.

Here I assess the performance of a priming-based approach as a predictive model of election outcomes against the conventional wisdom. I do so again with a focus on the tough case of U.S. presidential elections and rely on aggregate-level political and economic data. I estimate a conventional model of economic voting in U.S. presidential elections from 1952 to 2000. As in Chapter 1, I adapted Fair's (1978) model and regressed the incumbent-party candidate's two-party vote share on growth in GDP per capita, the length of time the incumbent party has held the presidency, and whether or not an incumbent is standing for reelection. To estimate a priming-based model, I interact

GDP growth with the intensity of the economic message in each election. OLS estimates of these competing models are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Evaluating the Priming Model vs. the Standard Model

	DV = Incumbent Vote Share	
	Standard Model	Priming Model
Standing Incumbent	-1.73 (3.19)	-2.52 (3.40)
Duration of Incumbent Party Rule	-7.49** (2.65)	-7.56** (2.74)
Growth (GDP per capita)	1.04** (0.36)	0.15 (0.52)
Intensity of the Economic Message	-	-3.26 (2.10)
Growth * Message	-	1.43* (0.66)
Constant	55.67*** (3.45)	58.15*** (3.37)
Observations	13	13
R-squared	0.739	0.844

Note: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

As expected, the estimate for GDP growth is positive and statistically significant in the conventional model. Although the estimate for GDP growth is positive in the priming-based model, it is not statistically significant. In fact, the results reveal that the impact of GDP growth depends on the intensity of the economic message. The coefficient estimate for the interaction term is positive and significant at the p=0.07 level. Again, voters' willingness to hold elected officials responsible for past economic

performance is conditioned by the economic message. Although these findings further support the central claim of this dissertation, my aim here is to compare the accuracy of predictions derived from these models. Based on the estimates above, Table 6.3 compares the predicted incumbent-party vote share from each model against the observed vote total from each election.

Table 6.3: The Predictive Power of the Priming Model

Year	Observed Incumbent Vote (2 party)	Model Predictions	
		Standard Model	Priming-Based Model
1952	44.60	48.68	42.75
1956	57.76	53.56	55.42
1960	49.91	<u>50.38</u>	<u>50.64</u>
1964	61.34	57.73	56.37
1968	49.60	<u>53.35</u>	<u>51.32</u>
1972	61.79	58.24	61.68
1976	48.95	<u>52.53</u>	<u>51.13</u>
1980	44.70	<u>52.19</u>	46.70
1984	59.17	57.94	60.94
1988	53.90	51.53	50.61
1992	46.55	<u>53.00</u>	47.65
1996	54.74	56.46	57.28
2000	50.27	50.92	50.76
<i>Average Absolute Error:</i>		3.23	1.93
<i>Incorrect Predictions:</i>		5	3

Note: Underlines signify incorrect predictions. Error is calculated as the predicted vote share minus observed vote share.

The results show that integrating a measure of the economic message into a model of presidential election outcomes reduces the average absolute prediction error by about 40% (from 3.23% to 1.93%). More importantly, this model also outperforms the conventional wisdom when it comes to picking a winner. Incorrect predictions from each

model (e.g. predicting an incumbent victory when the challenger wins) are underlined in Table 6.2. The predictions from the priming-based model improve on the conventional model by about 40%. As is to be expected with probabilistic models, neither fits the data perfectly. Both incorrectly predict the winner of the 1960, 1968, and 1976 elections. Yet, a model that accounts for candidates' economic campaign strategies correctly predicts the 1980 and 1992 elections, which the conventional model misses.

Perhaps not coincidentally, these elections are of great importance in American political history. Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 signaled the end of the Democratic strangle hold on the American South and ushered in what many thought would be a new era of Republican dominance. Similarly, Clinton's victory in 1992 saw the rise of the New Democrats and the longest economic expansion in U.S. history. The political and economic consequences of these elections can hardly be understated. Yet, these outcomes can be understood only when the model accounts for the strategic choices candidates make during a campaign.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter addressed two central questions. First, are the findings from the four U.S. and Mexican elections analyzed in prior chapters generalizable to elections in other countries and other institutional settings? Analysis of national elections in South Korea, Canada, and West Germany revealed once again that candidates' economic campaign messages systematically condition voters' willingness to hold incumbent-party candidates responsible for past economic performance. Conversely, when candidates emphasize economic messages, voters increasingly evaluate the candidates on economic considerations. When candidates are drawn to non-economic issues, voters follow. This

pattern is evident in campaigns in developed and developing countries, fledgling and established democracies, presidential and parliamentary systems, and in good and bad economic times. This is consistent with the predictions of priming theory and inconsistent with the predictions of conventional economic voting theory.

Second, if extant economic voting theory incorrectly specifies the mechanism that drives economic voting at the individual level, what, if any, are the consequences of this error? Does a priming-based model improve our understanding of real-world political outcomes? The answer is yes. Conventional models boast the ability to explain variation in the strength of the economic vote across elections and, most notably, the capacity to predict election outcomes. I show, however, that a priming-based model outperforms conventional models. This model can explain why economic retrospections are more predictive of vote choice in some elections than others (regardless of whether the economic vote was activated or deactivated during the election). Moreover, such a model provides more accurate predictions of election outcomes. While the model is not perfect, including a measure of the economic message helps explain two central elections in U.S. history that the conventional model treats as anomalous.

The results in this chapter, therefore, reinforce the conclusions from prior analyses and highlight the generalizability and utility of a priming-based model of economic voting. Once again, I have found that candidates' decisions about what they say, and how often, profoundly influences citizens' behavior. Even when the economic message suddenly appears or disappears in the middle of a campaign, voters respond. Unlike the conventional economic voting model, a priming-based theory provides a clear explanation for this type of elite influence.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

[A campaign is] like any other war—you begin with parades and bands and banners and high hopes convinced God is on your side, and end up bloody and battered and beaten to hell. But by God, you won.

– *Stuart Stevens, Media Consultant for George W. Bush, 2001*

In the last half-century, the international shift towards economic liberalization and globalization increasingly yoked national economic conditions to global trends. At the same time, advances in communication technology gave leaders the opportunity to reach their constituents more quickly and easily than ever before. Paradoxically, as governments lost the power to effect short-term economic change at home, a near cottage industry emerged in the social sciences linking domestic economic performance to election outcomes. And as candidates gained the unprecedented capacity to get their messages out, the apparent ubiquity of economic voting implied that candidates were hamstrung by the economy. Regardless of the choices they made during the campaign, voters would inevitably take governments to task for the state of the economy.

Despite the rise of the economic voting paradigm, candidates and their advisors stake their livelihoods on the conviction that their electoral fortunes depend in large part on finding the right message regardless of economic context. Campaigns expend vast amounts of time and money making choices about what to say and how often to say it. Of course, some messages fall flat. When things go wrong, however, candidates redouble their faith in the power of rhetoric rather than relinquish their fate to the deterministic logic of extant economic voting theory.

In support of this belief, cognitive-psychological research on “priming” suggests that candidates need not be victims of the economic vote. Priming theory holds that more accessible considerations weigh more heavily on evaluations of elected officials. Quite simply, if voters haven’t been thinking about the economy they won’t vote on the economy. Moreover, candidates, through their calculated decisions about what issues to emphasize during the campaign, can make certain considerations more accessible in the minds of voters (activation) and others less accessible (deactivation). Against the predictions of economic voting theory, this implies that candidates’ emphasis on economic issues profoundly affects voters’ propensity to hold incumbent-party candidates responsible for their economic stewardship.

This dissertation sought to resolve this fundamental disagreement between those who practice campaigns and those who study them by evaluating a priming-based model of economic voting against the conventional model. Does exposure to economic campaign messages condition the strength of the economic vote? Do economic forces hamstring candidates, or do candidates have the power to manipulate the economic vote strategically? Can candidates distract voters from unfavorable economic circumstances? When conditions are favorable, does victory depend on emphasizing economic issues? Most importantly, can these rhetorical efforts shift election outcomes in ways the conventional model cannot explain?

While these questions are simple, answering them is not. After decades of research in support of priming we still have few clear answers about the effect of campaign messages on the strength of the economic vote. As I explained throughout, the primary source of this confusion is the problem of “observational equivalence.” Prior studies identify an increase in the correlation between evaluations of past economic performance and vote choice over the course of a campaign. However, because these

variables are measured contemporaneously, scholars may inadvertently mistake which variable is the cause of the increased correspondence and which is the effect. So while many of these studies imply that candidates can prime an issue and that voters might respond, they fall short of showing that exposure to campaign messages systematically affects the extent to which voters evaluate candidates on economic issues. I overcame this problem by analyzing panel data (in which respondents are reinterviewed multiple times in the campaign), allowing me to measure the proposed cause prior to the effect.

Focusing on seven national elections in five countries, I then leveraged differences across these cases in the intensity of the economic message. Specifically, I selected three activating campaigns—in which the candidates focused squarely on economic issues—and four deactivating campaigns—in which the candidates said little or nothing about the economy. If conventional economic voting theory is correct that candidates have no influence over when or to what extent economic voting occurs, then economic opinion ought to have become increasingly predictive of vote choice over the course of all seven campaigns. However, if priming theory is correct, the economic vote should grow stronger only in activating elections. By contrast, economic evaluations should actually become less predictive of vote choice in the deactivating campaigns. I used panel surveys that spanned these campaigns to assess these competing hypotheses. Did Felipe Calderón’s sudden adoption of the economic message in the 2006 Mexican election activate the economic vote? Was Willy Brandt’s decision to expedite negotiations of the Basic Treaty with East Germany enough to deactivate negative economic opinions in the 1972 Bundestag elections? Did Al Gore lose the 2000 election because he failed to prime voters to think about the longest economic expansion in U.S. history?

The results support a priming-based approach to economic voting. While it is clear that economic opinion frequently informs vote choice, I find that the weight voters attach to economic considerations varies systematically with exposure to economic campaign messages. In all three activating elections, voters were exposed to high levels of economically themed ads, such as Bill Clinton's unwavering attack on George H.W. Bush's economic record, and they responded at the ballot box by turning to their economic opinion. Yet, in the absence of economic messages I found the absence of economic voting. In all four deactivating cases the candidates focused on non-economic issues and voters became less and less likely to hold governments responsible for past economic performance. Vicente Fox's meticulously crafted message of change, for instance, sparked a debate among the candidates over Mexico's political future, and voters followed by paying little attention to the country's recent economic success. I also find that these effects of the economic message, not predicted by conventional economic voting theory, help explain why incumbents so often win in down times and why challengers sometimes win in boom times. By reevaluating the psychology of economic voting in light of extensive research on priming, I shed light on a number of election outcomes the conventional model treats as anomalous.

## **CENTRAL FINDINGS**

### **Voters: Salience over Intentionality**

At the crux of the debate between conventional economic voting theory and priming theory is an ideal-typical assumption about individual voting behavior. Economic voting theory posits that, as self-interested citizens, voters *intend* to hold governments accountable for past economic performance. As election day nears, voters

gradually tune in to the contest, recall that the economy is good or bad, and eventually cast an economic ballot—voting for the incumbent-party candidate if they think the economy is doing well and for a challenger otherwise. If the economic vote is indeed driven by an innate desire, then economic opinion should become more and more predictive of vote choice over the course of any campaign.

The results presented here, however, paint a different picture of the mechanism that drives voters to turn to their economic opinion when casting a ballot. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, I found that the weight they attach to evaluations of the nation's economic past does not increase linearly, or necessarily, over the course of the campaign. In four of the seven elections I analyzed, the economic vote did not strengthen in the run-up to the election. In fact, the economic vote disappeared in two of these cases. Economic voting was quite prevalent at the outset of the 1972 West German and the 2000 Mexican elections. Yet, because of strategic shifts in the candidates' economic messaging strategies, citizens quickly turned to non-economic criteria, and economic retrospections had no impact on vote choice by election day. Plainly, citizens do not necessarily intend to cast an economic ballot.

Instead, test after test revealed that the economic vote varied with the salience of economic considerations in citizens' minds. Consistent with the predictions of priming theory, the strength of the economic vote increased substantially among voters in all three activating campaigns. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the rise in the economic vote occurred only after the candidates flooded the nation's living rooms with economic messages. In Chapter 3, I found that American voters in 1992 turned to their evaluations of Bush's economic stewardship when the Clinton campaign doubled down on the economic message in light of the Gennifer Flowers scandal. Similarly, Mexican voters became economic voters par excellence in 2006 only after Felipe Calderón abandoned his

message of honesty and transparency and took up the economy as his central theme. The results from Chapter 4 showed that this sudden change increased the salience of economic considerations and, consequently, activated the economic vote. Notably, I found that the salience of economic opinion and the strength of the economic vote varied with exposure to televised economic campaign ads. Economic retrospections powerfully shaped vote choice among citizens who saw lots of economic ads. Yet, for those who saw few economy-themed ads, economic opinion had no influence on vote choice.

While voters grew more willing to hold governments accountable for economic performance when economic considerations became salient, I found that the strength of the economic vote either decreased or remained insignificant in all four deactivating campaigns. At no time during the 2000 U.S. presidential election, 2000 Mexican presidential election, or the 2006 Canadian federal election were voters exposed to more than a smattering of economic ads. Rather than turn inevitably to their economic opinions, the results in Chapters 5 and 6 showed that economic considerations remained out of sight and out of mind throughout these historic campaigns.

Finally, I found that the economic vote falls as quickly as it rises. Willy Brandt's monumental, yet unexpected, decision to negotiate the Basic Treaty during the 1972 West German Bundestag campaign, and his wholesale adoption of a "deactivating" strategy instantly refocused the public eye on foreign affairs and away from rapidly rising prices under the Social Democrats. Just as the economic vote spiked in the 2006 Mexican election after economic considerations became salient, it vanished as the debate over the economy came to an abrupt halt. This was quite the reversal. The results showed a marked rise in the economic vote in the first month of the campaign when concern about inflation was almost ubiquitous. Again, these findings are consistent with the predictions of priming theory and wholly inconsistent with extant economic voting theory.

## **Candidates: The Power of Rhetorical Leadership**

If voters intend to hold governments accountable for past economic performance, as conventional economic voting theory assumes, it follows that candidates have little influence over when or to what extent economic voting occurs. By the time the campaign rolls around, the die has been cast already. Alternatively priming theory imbues candidates with the power to activate or deactivate the economic vote strategically. By emphasizing or deemphasizing economic issues in campaign communications, candidates can manipulate the salience of economic considerations and condition the economic vote. As such, priming theory implies that candidates can use rhetoric to capitalize on favorable economic conditions or overcome conditions thought to hamstring them.

Marking a substantial departure from the conventional view of candidates, the results highlight the power of rhetorical leadership. The narrative accounts revealed the weighty consequences of candidates' decisions about communication strategy in general and how to address the economy in particular. Even a seemingly ad hoc slogan like Vicente Fox's generic call for "change" in the 2000 Mexican presidential election was selected from numerous variations on the theme of change and was chosen because it made no reference to economic policy or ideology. The individual-level analyses showed that these strategic calculations shaped the strength of the economic vote and, in some cases, proved electorally decisive. The results in Chapter 4 show that Calderón's decision to change course and activate the economic vote in 2006 altered the final vote tally by more than four points—far larger than his margin of victory and more than half of the six-point deficit he faced when he made the decision.

Notably, I found that this power to shape the economic vote is not limited to particular institutional, economic, or political contexts. The moderating effect of communication strategy was evident in new and longstanding democracies, developed

and developing nations, and presidential and parliamentary systems. Candidates used their messages to take advantage of favorable economic circumstances and to avoid unfavorable ones. Incumbents, not just standing incumbents, activated the economic vote in good times (e.g. Felipe Calderón) and challengers activated economic concerns when the economy was in decline (e.g. Lee Myung-bak, Bill Clinton). Similarly, challengers were able to draw attention away from positive economic conditions (e.g. Vicente Fox, George W. Bush) while incumbents, even standing incumbents, managed to avoid scrutiny in tough economic times (e.g. Willy Brandt).

Moreover, the results make clear that candidates are not “locked in” to a certain strategy during the campaign. After his failed attempt to minimize public concerns about rising prices, Willy Brandt, with complicity from the East Germans, rushed to finish negotiations of the Basic Treaty in advance of the 1972 Bundestag election. As I find in Chapter 6, the announcement changed the campaign from a debate over prices into a fight over Ostpolitik. Brandt’s choice led to the collapse of the economic vote and the first left of center majority in the Bundestag since World War II.

Of course, not all candidates are as deft as Brandt, and some decisions about how to address the economy backfired. Most famously, Al Gore chose not to hitch his wagon to Bill Clinton’s economic success in 2000. When his campaign staff pushed him to focus on the economy, Gore resisted. Disastrously, he turned his attention to campaign finance reform and, perhaps not coincidentally, allegations quickly emerged about his fundraising excesses at a Buddhist temple in 1996. Although we cannot rerun history to be sure, the results presented here suggest that Gore’s decision not to activate the economic vote cost him the election. Strategic miscalculations like this one, however, do not diminish the importance of political leadership. That the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry fell to Crazy Horse at the Little Bighorn in 1876 does not lessen the impact of General Custer’s order,

against the advice of his scouts, to attack. In fact, missteps like Gore's highlight candidates' power to condition the effect of economic context on the final vote tally.

### **Election Outcomes: Moving Beyond “The Economy, Stupid”**

The results presented throughout this dissertation show that conventional economic voting theory misspecifies the mechanism that links economic opinion to vote preference and, accordingly, underestimates candidates' power to condition the economic vote strategically. But what does this teach us about real-world politics? Can a priming-based model of economic voting improve our understanding of election outcomes?

In Chapter 1, I analyzed the predictive power of the conventional economic voting model cross-nationally, across U.S. elections, and at the individual level. I found that these models, which assume the economy's influence on incumbent-party vote share is uniform across cases, pick the wrong winner about one quarter of the time. In Chapter 6, I used the same data to evaluate a model that allows the influence of national economic performance to vary with the intensity of the candidates' economic messages in televised ads. Consistent with the priming approach, the model outperforms the conventional one, reducing prediction error by 40%. Substantively, the results show that the priming approach can explain both “normal” patterns of economic voting and a number of apparent aberrations from these patterns, including some of the most politically consequential election outcomes in the last forty years.

The case-level analyses reveal similar improvements over the conventional model. The results from the activating cases affirm the general correspondence between national economic conditions and incumbent electoral success. Bill Clinton and Lee Myung-bak defeated incumbents in economic downturns and Felipe Calderón staved off the opposition in a strong economy. This is not surprising. After all, candidates often

place economic issues at or near the center of the campaign discourse, greasing the wheels of the economic vote. Yet, it is also true that candidates in a number of elections do not hang their hats on the economy. The lack of economic voting in all four deactivating cases shows that outcomes in this class of election are not necessarily deviant. In fact, by linking individual-level psychology and candidate behavior, priming theory provides a reason to expect that incumbents will often emerge victorious in down times and challengers victorious in boom times.

## **LIMITATIONS**

In evaluating the effect of televised economic campaign ads on the strength of the economic vote, this dissertation suffers from several limitations that warrant brief discussion. Because it was not feasible in the context of this project to randomly assign voters to different levels of economic stimuli, I have relied exclusively on observational data.<sup>97</sup> This naturally raises concerns about the possibility of alternative explanations for the findings. Recognizing this threat to the validity of my inferences, I took a number of steps to control for potential confounds.

First, and perhaps most importantly, I used panel data to evaluate changes in the strength of the economic vote. Panel data alleviates many concerns about alternative explanation by design because it holds the individual constant (Gerber et al. 2010). Second, careful case selection held the “clarity of responsibility” for economic outcomes constant within countries while allowing potential institutional and structural confounds to vary across cases. That the expected activating or deactivating effects were observed

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<sup>97</sup>A laboratory experiment would seem like an appealing alternative to a field experiment. However, recent laboratory tests of priming (e.g. Hart & Middleton 2012; Lenz 2012) reveal an unpalatable trade-off between experimental power and external validity. Maximizing the realism of the experimental treatment and setting minimizes the researcher’s ability to acquire the appropriate sample size, and vice versa.

in all seven elections mitigates my concern about these potential confounds. Third, where advertising frequency data was available, I modeled the strength of the economic vote directly as a function of individual-level exposure to advertising. Existing analyses often rely on ideal-typical assumptions about candidate behavior to evaluate the conditioning effect of campaign messages. Yet, without empirical measures of campaign content and effort, the risk of a “false positive” is high—an apparent campaign priming effect may actually be evidence of the effect of the campaign in general, for instance.<sup>98</sup> Finally, in the two central activating cases (US 1992 and MX 2006), I content-coded nine months of front-page economic news coverage to control for the possibility that economic news caused the candidates to focus on the economy and primed the economic vote. Yet, in both cases, the results revealed that media coverage could not explain the observed patterns of activation.

Another concern with the present study is that the results, particularly the size of the priming effects, may not be generalizable. Part of the challenge in this dissertation was to find elections in which the candidates either focused centrally on economic issues or not at all. I was especially interested in campaigns in which candidates suddenly increased or decreased the salience of economic considerations. Moreover, I needed cases for which panel studies with at least three waves of interviews had been conducted. As a result, the cases may be seen as unusual or extreme. We might wonder what would happen, for instance, if one candidate tries to prime the economy and the other tries to prime party affiliation, as was the case in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Priming theory would predict a small increase in the economic vote and, correspondingly, a small

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<sup>98</sup>Relying on ideal-typical assumptions about candidate behavior also increases the risk of a false negative—mistakenly concluding that campaign messages had no effect on the economic vote. However, “null” findings are not typical in the literature (alternatively: Matthews and Johnston 2008).

effect on the final vote tally. If this is the norm and cases like Mexico 2006 the exception, have I overstated the power of rhetorical leadership?

I do not believe I have. My argument throughout has been that candidates have the ability to shape the economic vote rhetorically, and that these priming effects change vote preferences. It is not my contention that candidates can radically alter the vote tally easily or unilaterally. The evidence makes this clear. George H.W. Bush's eleventh hour switch to character issues and traditional values in 1992 slowed the rising tide of economic voting. Yet because Clinton and Perot would not relinquish their activating messages, Bush could not undo the self-inflicted damage of his initial activating strategy. The strategic moves made by Felipe Calderón and Willy Brandt were more successful because they lured opposing candidates to join an unwinnable fight, either over economic issues in an expansionary period or over the increasingly popular Ostpolitik.

History also makes clear that candidates are not always in full control of the salience of economic considerations. What could Herbert Hoover have done in 1932 to distract voters from their ongoing suffering during the Great Depression? Similarly, what could Rainer Barzel have done in 1972 when the media flooded the airwaves with what was likely the biggest story since the Berlin Blockade in 1948/49? The contrast between these cases and a case like the 2006 Mexican election highlights both the power that leaders wield and its limits. In this way, I haven't rejected one extreme view for another. In fact, priming represents a middle ground between the notion that candidates' are helpless victims of a preordained economic fate and the idea that election outcomes are merely elite constructions.

## IMPLICATIONS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

### Is the “Panel Method” Necessary?

In Chapter 3 I drew on Lenz’s (2012) corrective for analyzing panel data, to develop a method that assesses the strength of the economic vote while eliminating the potential threat of reverse causality. This was an important step in light of the extensive research on the endogeneity between vote preference and evaluations of the economy. Yet, at no point did the results from the conventional, cross-sectional method diverge from the results obtained using the panel procedure. Does this mean that we can trust findings from prior studies of economic voting, and, by extension, is the panel method unnecessary in future research?

Answering this question is a matter of both empirics and philosophy. My analyses in this dissertation are not exhaustive. It may be that I would have found significant divergence had I chosen different campaigns from the universe of cases. While I cannot think of a reason why the results of the panel and cross-sectional methods would converge in these cases but not in others, assuming that no distinguishing feature exists raises the risk of committing a Type I error, mistakenly rejecting the null of no priming. Interestingly, increasing the risk that we mistakenly identify priming in a deactivating case raises the risk that we mistakenly conclude that candidates cannot condition the economic vote (a Type II error). Economic voting scholars who choose to rely on the cross-sectional method take on this risk at their own peril.

Even if we accept these risks, there is a more fundamental concern that must be addressed. Namely, the conventional test misspecifies the dependent variable.<sup>99</sup> The

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<sup>99</sup>We might also worry that abandoning the panel method prevents us from testing the proposed “causal mechanism” that links economic evaluations to vote preferences. As noted in Chapter 4, if we cannot be sure that the salience of economic considerations increased over time, we may worry that an increase in the economic vote merely reflect differences in residual variation (Allison 1999; Williams 2009).

cross-sectional method estimates the (apparent) effect of economic evaluations on vote choice at a given time. Essentially, this answers the question: do voters with positive economic evaluations like the incumbent party candidate after an increase in the salience of economic issues? Priming, however, is a theory of *change* in preferences, not static preferences. The appropriate test of priming, and the one that only the panel method provides, is whether or not voters with positive economic retrospections like the incumbent candidate *more* after an increase in the salience of economic issues. This is a serious problem. Panel data is scarce and extraordinarily expensive to collect. Should studying economic voting necessitate a sizable grant? Should scholars be limited to the few cases for which panel data is available? Or is an honest acknowledgment of this flaw sufficient? I leave this crucial issue to future researchers.

### **The Clarity of Responsibility: What is it Good for?**

While it was not my aim in this dissertation to test priming theory directly against the “clarity of responsibility” hypothesis (Powell & Whitten 1993), the results are nonetheless instructive. Economic voting scholars have long understood that the strength of the economic vote varies across countries and from election to election.<sup>100</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 1, the argument is that, while voters intend to assign credit or blame to incumbent-party candidates for the state of the economy, voters in some cases are inhibited from assessing the incumbent’s responsibility for the state of the economy (e.g. Alcañiz & Hellwig 2011) or competence as economic steward (e.g. Alesina & Rosenthal 1995; Duch & Stevenson 2008).

Differences in the clarity of responsibility, however, cannot explain the patterns of economic voting observed within or across the seven cases analyzed in this

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<sup>100</sup>Though the expectation within campaigns is that the variation is necessarily linear and positive.

dissertation. The marked contrast in the pattern of economic voting both within and across the 2000 and 2006 Mexican presidential campaigns is especially notable given the similarities in the institutional and structural factors often thought to determine the clarity of responsibility. Why, for instance, did the strength of the economic vote increase so dramatically in 2006, and why was it so strong relative to 2000? After more than seven decades of single-party rule in Mexico, the PRI was at least as responsible for the state of the economy in 2000 as the PAN in 2006. Similarly, the “strategic parties” hypothesis that economic voting increases when candidates offer ideologically distinct economic proposals (Hellwig 2012) cannot explain the observed spike in economic voting during the 2006 campaign or the marked drop off in the 1972 West German campaign.

Of course my aim is not to dismiss these theories. However, even a passing examination of these cases raises questions about the validity and utility of these approaches. As with enlightened preference theory (Gelman & King 1993), the baseline assumption is that individuals intend to cast an economic ballot. On top of this, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis assumes that voters are capable, accurate judges of the government’s hand in domestic economic fortunes or follies. This is a strong assumption, and recent studies show it to be unwarranted. In a laboratory experiment, Huber et al. (2012) find that misattribution of responsibility is the norm, rather than the exception. Even when responsibility is made explicit, participants systematically failed to follow the cues. Similarly, voters have been found to punish governments for things like shark attacks, natural disasters, and other “acts of god” beyond their control (Achen & Bartels 2004).

The question, then, is why so many studies find that the strength of the economic vote varies with the clarity of responsibility. Why does it appear that voters behave this way when individual-level analysis makes clear that they do not? I leave it to future

studies to explore this question more carefully, but one possible explanation is worth considering. It is common that U.S. presidential elections are assigned the highest score on the clarity of responsibility variable. This has bothered me on several occasions. How is it that responsibility for economic outcomes is clearest in a presidential system with an independent central bank and high level of international economic interdependence? It would seem that the president's responsibility for the U.S. economy is unclear. Unfortunately, little information is provided about how these cases are scored, and reliance on Powell and Whitten's (1993) coding is common. One might wonder how the results of these studies would change if one employed a different coding scheme.

### **Is Candidate Behavior Predictable?**

Given the power that candidates wield to activate or deactivate the economic vote, a puzzling question remains: why would anyone ever choose a strategy that is disadvantageous? Why, for instance, did Labastida not prime the economy in 2000? By contrast, why would López Obrador opt to follow Calderón down the activating path in 2006? Although a complete answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this study, these issues warrant some consideration.

The narratives presented here make it clear that candidates' choices are neither random nor determined wholly by economic context. Beyond miscalculation, at least three factors might drive candidates to adopt an unexpected strategy. The first is mixed economic performance. While some argue that one candidate always stands to gain by activating the economy (e.g. Campbell 2000), economic opinion is often neutral. It was not immediately clear in 2006, for instance, that "the economy" was the best way to fuel Calderón's comeback. In his consultation with Dick Morris, Calderón nearly took up the

issue of crime instead. The candidate simply felt more comfortable with economic themes.

Second, a candidate's prior reputation, or her party's reputation, may draw her to certain issues and away from others irrespective of context. López Obrador built his public identity largely on his stances on poverty and joblessness. After Calderón's switch to an activating strategy he may have found himself in a position where he could not back down from an economic fight. Similarly, candidates may find themselves constrained in the general election by their party's history of "issue ownership" (Petrocik 1996). For instance, a leftist candidate accused by the right of being soft on corporations may be compelled to speak at length of his support for labor unions. How could Rainer Barzel, for instance, back down from a challenge on relations with Communist East Germany, especially after he forced a constructive vote of no confidence over the "friendship" treaties?

Lastly, as I discussed briefly in Chapter 2, pressure from the opposition may constrain candidates from taking up their desired message. In 2000, Labastida distanced himself from the PRI and Zedillo's economic success in the face of Madrazo's criticism that he was a PRI insider. In the general election campaign, Fox's ability to refocus policy-based discussion onto the issue of democratic change put Labastida on the offensive against his own party instead of defending recent growth. Similarly, Willy Brandt's decision in 1972 to thrust Ostpolitik to the center of the political debate was an attack on what had been the CDU's "turf." However, Barzel's need to engage on Ostpolitik meant that the CDU could no longer devote their resources to activating economic concerns. George W. Bush took a slightly different course in constraining his opponent. Part of his clever deactivating strategy was to acknowledge forthrightly that the economy was booming. In fact, it formed the basis for his compassionate

conservative agenda, which Bush was very comfortable talking about. This stole some of Gore's thunder and may have pushed the Vice President to talk about his own reasons for running, which he proved unable to communicate. Finally, Lee Myung-bak avoided the usual battle over North Korea by agreeing wholeheartedly with the "Sunshine" policy his party fought against for so many years. He could not be baited into an ideological fight, in some sense taking the issue off the table.

With strategies like these at their disposal, we might wonder why candidates would ever allow their opponents to manipulate the economic vote. Wouldn't they simply adopt the approach that would nullify the effect of the opponent's messages? If one thinks of campaigning as a zero-sum game between two candidates with equal resources, then the answer may be yes. However, outside of a few U.S. presidential contests, candidates' access to resources is often very unequal. As a result, candidates can dominate the message for long periods of the campaign (although, as the 2000 Mexican election shows, candidates who outspend their opponents, but choose the wrong strategy, still lose). Even in the U.S., however, candidates are forced to make a choice in an ever-changing environment, which makes miscalculations more likely. George H.W. Bush held numerous meetings with his advisors from late 1991 to the summer of 1992 to gauge the state of the economy. Finally, the July 1992 jobs report disabused the President and his team of the notion that the economy would turn around and carry them to victory. Had the report shown substantial growth, we might be wondering in hindsight why Clinton was so insistent on attacking Bush's economic stewardship when the recession had clearly bottomed out in the summer of 1991. Lastly, in multiparty elections, particularly when small parties are fighting for seats in the cabinet or access to state resources, candidates' communication strategy may not follow economic context.

## **Does it Matter How Candidates Talk about the Economy?**

Is all campaign rhetoric created equally? Beyond the distinction between economic and non-economic messages, I have treated campaign messages homogeneously throughout the dissertation. Yet personal experience tells us that some campaign ads are more effective than others. While some pass out of mind almost instantly, others are recalled effortlessly many years after the election. Almost fifty years after its one and only airing, Lyndon Johnson's infamous "Daisy" ad remains a part of the American psyche, while thousands of other ads from the last half century, some of which aired thousands of times, have been forgotten. This hardly constitutes proof of heterogeneous priming effects. Yet we have to wonder if the memorability of an ad or the particular phrasing of a message is unrelated to its effect on issue salience.

Existing research points to two factors that might attenuate priming effects. First, research on framing (e.g. Druckman 2001), persuasion (e.g. Petty & Wegener 1998), and priming (Miller & Krosnick 2000) shows that these effects diminish if recipients of news stories find the person delivering the information untrustworthy or unknowledgeable (alternatively: Barker et al. 1998; Riker 1990). Second, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argue that priming effects are more prevalent when news stories interpret events as the result of the government's actions.

Surprisingly, these arguments challenge the notion that automatic accessibility mediates the priming relationship, suggesting instead that priming is a more conscious process or one that is conditioned by conscious processes. More importantly, neither argument seems to get at the issue of effectiveness in a satisfactory manner. Consider Felipe Calderón's ad in which the narrator shouts "Debt! Debt! And more Debt!" Would the claim that "López Obrador will increase the national debt" have been as effective in activating economic concerns? Should Ronald Reagan simply have asserted in 1984 that

voters were better off than they were four years ago? Would George H.W. Bush's deactivating script have been equally ineffective in the hands of a more skillful orator? My inclination is to answer these questions in the negative. What, then, constitutes an effective ad? Do certain stimuli tap into target constructs more centrally or powerfully than others?

Scholars of rhetoric might point to the phrasing of a message and the manner of its delivery as potential moderators of its impact. Teachers and standup comedians alike recognize that proper timing and intonation can highlight aspects of a message that might otherwise go unnoticed. Masterful authors and preachers recognize that the use of hyperbole, litote, chiasmus and other simple devices can maximize the force of a message.<sup>101</sup> Is there a way to turn these abstract insights into a concrete means of differentiating one campaign ad from another?

Research on framing often draws the distinction between “strong frames” and “weak frames,” arguing that the former are more effective than the latter (e.g. Chong 1993, 2000; Gamson & Modigliani 1987). Yet strong frames are identified either in laboratory pre-tests (i.e. the frame that had the greatest impact on subjects) or as the frame that emerges over the course of a campaign (i.e. candidates naturally discard weaker frames in favor of stronger frames). In this sense, effectiveness is tautological. Moreover, the effectiveness of these frames seems to vary by context (Chong & Wolinsky-Nahmias 2005).

Existing research, therefore, provides very little guidance. While scholars recognize the need to make such “quality-based” distinctions between campaign messages (e.g. Chong & Druckman 2007), we are left with no a priori means of

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<sup>101</sup>The method I used throughout the dissertation to code the ads controls for some of these effects. My “gestalt” method captures my impression, as a viewer, of the centrality of economic issues to the ad rather than the number of times the economy is mentioned.

evaluating ads. Perhaps no such method will be discovered, suggesting that the skillful rhetorician is more artist than scientist.

### **What Else Can We Learn from Priming?**

Priming is more than a theory of the weight attached to economic considerations. While I have focused exclusively on economic voting in this dissertation, priming holds that the weight attached to any consideration in the voting calculus increases when some external stimulus raises the salience of that issue. This implies that candidates can also activate or deactivate other performance issues or policy positions. For instance, I found that Willy Brandt's negotiation of the Basic Treaty deactivated economic considerations. While my analysis ended here, priming theory would also predict that this shift activated opinions of Ostpolitik, displacing voters' focus on inflation early in the campaign. Similarly, we might wonder if Vicente Fox's message of change activated the "regime cleavage" at the same time as it deactivated the economic vote.

The method I developed here to evaluate changes in the effect of economic retrospections on vote choice could be adapted easily to assess possibilities like these. If it is true that candidates can prime any issue, I may actually be understating the power candidates wield to shape election outcomes. However, as I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, there is surprisingly little support for priming on non-economic issues. Notably, Lenz (2012) argues that while performance evaluations, including evaluations of the economy, can be primed, positional issues cannot. That is, there is no unconfounded evidence that voters evaluate candidates on the policy positions they take during the campaign. This finding is arresting. Can it be that issues like abortion, income redistribution, free trade, education, and the privatization of public industries have no impact on vote choices? Lenz's analyses are by no means exhaustive, and the data employed throughout this

dissertation could be used as further tests of these propositions. Yet, it is worth asking what might make economic considerations and other performance issues unique.

Lenz argues that performance issues, unlike complex policy questions, are easy for citizens to understand. Their personal experiences with recent economic performance or television reports of military conquests have solidified their positions on the government's handling of the economy or foreign affairs before the salience of the issue is raised. When a candidate raises the salience of issues like hydrofracturing (fracking) or the privatization of social security, however, citizens find they have few strong priors. Rather than forming an opinion and then choosing the candidate who holds the same opinion, voters learn that the candidate they prefer is on one side of the issue and adopt that position as their own.

This argument poses a new challenge to priming theory. In particular, it implies that the salience of an issue is a necessary but insufficient condition for priming. If voters' opinions on an issue are weakly formed or non-existent, then an increase in the salience of that issue will not strengthen the effect of that issue on candidate evaluations. It will merely induce opinion taking. This places clear constraints on candidates as rhetorical leaders, restricting the range of issues that they might activate or deactivate in order to change vote preferences. This is especially true if voters are as ignorant of political affairs as social scientists suggest they are. Priming, then, is not a "theory of everything" and future research is needed to evaluate the sufficiency of accessibility as a mediator of the priming relationship. However, this does not diminish the central finding of this study that communication strategy systematically conditions the strength of the economic vote.

## **Priming without Borders?**

Outside of research on economic voting, a number of scholars have argued that U.S. presidential campaigns are “mostly about salience, not confrontation [on issues]” (Riker 1993, p. 4; Budge 1993; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994, 2000). Is this true across the globe? Although the media-centered campaign is becoming the global norm rather than the American exception, we might wonder if there are countries or contexts in which priming is of little import. While I have shown that battles over the salience of economic considerations had important consequences for national elections in five countries, my analysis is not exhaustive. Here I consider situations in which priming may not be central to understanding election outcomes. It is important to note that my argument is not that some electorates are more or less susceptible to the activating or deactivating effects of campaign appeals. Priming effects are well documented and appear to reflect a set of inherited, rather than learned, cognitive tendencies. Instead, I raise the possibility that two factors limit the potential gains to be made from priming.

First, there is reason to believe that the value of priming as a campaign strategy is negatively related to the strength of a country’s party system. Voters in weak party systems face a choice between high numbers of candidates, many of whom come from new parties. What does one challenger in a field of as many as fifteen candidates stand to gain from activating the economy? How can she even get her message to stand out in the sea of noise? In this fluid and uncertain context, candidates may stand to gain more from demonstrating their viability (i.e. that they can compete and win) rather than their commitment to a given set of issues. In Peru, for instance, candidates often pay voters to attend their rallies in the hopes that news stories about plazas full of energetic “supporters” will signal to the electorate that they are a competitive candidate (Muñoz

2012). In cases like these, campaigns may be more about credibility than salience. This seems especially true in the first round of multi-stage elections.

Second, resource asymmetries, either in terms of finances or access to paid media, may shape the strategic value of priming. I suspect, however, that the effect is non-linear, with priming being least valuable when there is either extreme discrepancy or perfect parity between the candidates or parties. In Brazil, for instance, candidates are given equal and fixed advertising time. Although not impossible, it would be difficult for candidates in this context to shape issue salience when they lack the ability to be “louder” than their opponents. Alternatively, when one party or candidate has the ability to out-advertise his opponents by wide margins, candidates may find priming futile. Without the capacity to get the message out, strategies focused on registering and mobilizing likely supporters may be the most valuable.

In the face of these problems, however, one might argue that candidates can resort to priming by other means. When campaign finances are strictly regulated, or when advertising time is fixed, candidates may turn to the “free media.” Instead of purchasing additional ads to turn the volume up on their message, they may try to book interviews on popular talk shows, news programs, or comedy hours. Ross Perot, for instance, launched himself to front-runner status in the 1992 campaign by booking several interviews on *Larry King Live*. Assuming that media outlets are not under the thumb of the government, this free media strategy may represent a weapon of the weak, allowing candidates to reach wide audiences and to fight back in the battle over salience.

### **Media Fragmentation and the End of Campaign Priming**

In the opening to this chapter, I noted that technological innovations in the last sixty years, especially the rise of television, have given candidates unprecedented access

to their constituents' living rooms. Candidates rapidly acquired the power to press their cases to anyone within earshot of a television. The sizable activating and deactivating effects identified throughout this dissertation would not have been possible in the absence of this advancement in communication technology. Now the tables may be turning again as technological innovation threatens the potential electoral gains to be made by conditioning the salience of issues like past economic performance.

The secret to television's success as a medium for priming is not its visual nature per se but the fact that it commands a vast and captive audience. Where almost every household has a television and where viewer choice is limited to only a few channels, televised ads speak to the electorate at large. The age or gender balance of the audience may change based on time of day, but a spot generally reaches supporters, potential converts, undecided voters, and ardent opponents. Yet, the rise of cable television and the internet as sources of both news and entertainment is fragmenting audiences politically (e.g. Prior 2007). Individuals need not watch channels, visit websites, or follow twitter feeds that forward ideas that run counter to their own. Instead, they can customize their lives to reinforce their political predispositions. Candidates' control over and access to citizens' information environments is slipping.

In this increasingly fragmented world, the importance of issue salience may be waning. A spot aired during the evening news may no longer reach a large cross-section of voters. Instead, the ad reaches a small and increasingly homogenous audience. To compensate, should a conservative candidate spend millions of dollars buying ads on a station watched almost exclusively by liberals, knowing that viewers are unlikely to convert and that the liberal candidate will outspend them on that channel? Or should the candidate limit their scope and reach out to likely supporters with text messages, emails, and targeted ads on websites? In the latter scenario, priming becomes a means of

reinforcement rather than conversion. Interestingly, this may turn the “minimal effects” hypothesis on its head. Rather than a zero-sum game in which opposing forces cancel each other out through repeated conflict, campaigns may become less important because they rarely come in contact with each other.

Consider the 2012 U.S. presidential election as an example. Although I do not have access to campaign data, it seems fair to say that Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee, focused on activating considerations of past economic performance while Democratic president Barack Obama focused on priming a sort of Democratic identity. Did Romney’s efforts activate the economic vote? Priming theory would argue that they did but only among those who were exposed repeatedly to the message. Yet, if the primary recipients came across the ads while watching Fox News, listening to Rush Limbaugh, or reading posts on Redstate, what was the effect of the increase in salience? Perhaps these individuals moved to the right on the latent voting scale, but their realized vote preference was unmoved.

Although this depiction of a wildly fragmented public may be exaggerated, this example may offer a window into the future of campaigning. The traditional powerhouse networks in the U.S. continue to shed viewers, and advertising on channels that would have been seen as fringe outlets only a decade ago (e.g. Comedy Central) is skyrocketing. The importance for campaigns of sites like YouTube and Facebook (which use viewers’ personal information to customize advertising on the page) is growing at a breakneck pace. Whether and to what extent candidates will discover new ways to turn elections into battles over issue salience remains to be seen.

## **Agency and the Normative Implications of Priming**

What does economic priming mean for democracy? In Chapter 1 I argued that despite almost thirty years of research on priming, scholars did not incorporate these findings into a theory of economic voting because of normative concerns for representative democracy. Historically, economic voting theory rose as a counterpoint to the notion that voters are generally unfit for self-governance. The observation that incumbents typically win in good economic times and are defeated in tough times was cause for optimism. While it falls short of the Jeffersonian ideal, economic voting paints a more flattering picture of modern democracies than the argument that election outcomes turn on things like good looks, gaffes, and party affiliation. Voters may not evaluate candidates on detailed policy positions, but at least they hold governments accountable after the fact. Priming is seen as a challenge to this last bastion of democratic accountability. After all, I found that clever candidates and deft strategists were able to activate or deactivate the economic vote in order to escape the executioner's axe. What does this say about the quality of democracy in the communication age?

From a classical perspective, the power and generalizability of the activating and deactivating effect of campaign messages paints a very bleak outlook for democracy. Voters are not identifying the common good and then imploring their chosen representatives to pursue it. Instead, modern media campaigns push fickle voters from one issue to another, taking advantage of their inborn tendency to evaluate candidates on those criteria that are most available in recent memory. If elites have the ability to shape election outcomes rhetorically, then campaigns are actually an exercise in elite control of voters rather than an exercise of popular power. The classical ideal is turned on its head.

There is, however, a more optimistic view of the findings in support of priming. If one is willing to move from the classical ideal toward Schumpeter's minimalist, or

procedural notion of democracy, then powerful leadership need not be at odds with good governance. Schumpeter argues that because individuals are not fully “rational” beings, government by the people is no ideal at all. In fact, charging voters with the task of making policy decisions by electing representatives to carry out their will may be worse for the people than other types of rule. Instead, Schumpeter argues that democracy is a mechanism by which elites compete for popular support and then carry out their agenda. Leadership, therefore, is central to democracy rather than an afterthought or threat.

Priming likely falls somewhere between these competing notions of democracy, falling short of both ideals but above any dystopian alternative. Priming certainly represents a break from the classic ideal. Citizens pushed around by changing campaign messages are much weaker and less virtuous than Jefferson’s yeoman farmers. Yet, priming holds that voters’ evaluations of past economic performance are their own. As a number of examples throughout the present study suggest, candidates activate or deactivate them at their own peril. In this way, candidates have not pulled the wool over our eyes completely. And despite the apparent importance of political leadership, priming is not a wholesale realization of Schumpeterian democracy. This elite-driven model asks little of citizens, yet its success depends on their ability to hold governments accountable. Priming may interfere directly with voters’ propensity to do so. On the other hand, evidence from the four “deactivating” cases hardly shows that voters are evaluating candidates on normatively bad dimensions. Voters in Mexico’s 2000 election may not have given the government credit for its economic success, but they did manage to oust the PRI after seven decades of uninterrupted, often repressive, rule. Similarly, Brandt escaped the economic vote, but it can hardly be seen as problematic that voters instead evaluated the merits of his coalition’s radical new policy of *Détente*.

In this sense, priming is a middle ground on which no one's hands are tied completely. Voters are not victims of campaign rhetoric, yet they are not in full control of the political agenda. Candidates are not hapless victims of the economic vote, yet their capacity to manipulate voters is limited by opposing candidates and by voters themselves. Both are agents constrained not by institutions or structure but by the countervailing ambitions of other agents.

## Appendix

Here I present the statistical models I use throughout the dissertation as well as full estimates of the tests not presented in the main chapters. I also provide detailed information about variable coding and construction, and the method I used to content-code televised ads and newspaper stories. Finally, I show estimates of several tests of robustness.

### PROCEDURE FOR CONTENT-CODING ADS AND NEWSPAPER STORIES

In order to measure campaign content, I conducted an original content analysis of all candidate-sponsored presidential campaign advertisements in the 1992 and 2000 U.S. presidential elections and the 2000 and 2006 Mexican presidential elections. In each case, I limit my analysis to those ads sponsored by the major candidates. I exclude co-sponsored ads and ads sponsored by interest groups or the political party as a whole (not the candidate). I also exclude “unsponsored” ads. Because of limited data availability in the Mexican cases, I only coded ads from the general election campaigns.

Video of the campaign spots for the 2006 Mexican presidential election were accessed from the Mexican *Instituto Federal Electoral*’s (IFE) website. For MX 2000, video of the ads was provided generously by Vidal Romero, Professor of Political Science at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). For US 1992, video of the primary and general campaign ads were purchased from political scientist Darrel West. Story boards and scripts of the ads aired in the 2000 U.S. presidential election were purchased from the Wisconsin Ad Project.

I coded each ad for any spoken mention of the economy. I considered mentions of things like unemployment, jobs, growth, debt, inflation, prices, the economy,

prosperity, trade, taxes, and business conditions to be mentions of the economy. No visual elements—including words displayed on the screen—were coded. I did code songs and jingles, even if they played in the background. I then weighted each spot by the centrality of the economic message. The weighting scheme is as follows: 1=The economy is of primary importance; 0.75=The economy is of secondary or tertiary importance; 0.5=The economy is of only minor importance; 0.25=The economy is mentioned only in passing; 0=No economic mention. I used the Gestalt method, taking my immediate, overall impression of the focus on economic themes, rather than counting individual mentions of the economy.

To control for the potentially confounding effect of economic news, I also content-coded stories published on the front page of leading national newspapers. In Mexico, I selected *Reforma*, and I chose the *New York Times* in the U.S. elections. I hand coded all front-page news stories for nine pre-election months. As a screening mechanism, I began by eliminating all front-page articles (50 words or more in length) that were neither economic nor political based on the headline. Next, I eliminated any article that made no mention of the domestic economy. The articles were then content-coded and weighted using the method described above. The results of the coding in US 1992 and MX 2006 conformed to outside coding of these particular papers. Interestingly, the strength of the economic message in these papers was also similar to the message in other papers and on television news.

How reliable are the results of this coding procedure? One might worry that, because I am aware of my own hypotheses in each election, I might unknowingly code the ads to support my expectations. Although I lacked the funds to hire outside coders who do not know the hypotheses, there is reason to be confident in the results. First, the overall results in each case mirror the numerous journalistic and academic accounts of the

elections. Second, where possible, I compared my own results to other scholars' efforts. In US 2000, the Wisconsin Ad Project (WAP) coded the issue content of each ad. Although they do not code the centrality of particular issues, they do note the issues mentioned in each ad. Therefore, I compared my own coding to theirs, and found agreement on about 98% of the ads. There were five ads that I coded as economic that WAP did not. In this sense, my results may actually overestimate slightly the intensity of economic messages in this deactivating campaign.

The coding in the 2006 election is far more crucial to this study. Although a great deal was made of Calderón's shift in strategy, it is important to make sure that I did not inadvertently code the ads to reflect my prior knowledge of the campaign trajectory. There are two reasons to believe this is not the case. First, I coded the ads alphabetically, rather than by their airing date. That is, I was unaware if the ad was aired before or after the activating switch. Second, my results mirror the results of content coding conducted as part of the Mexico 2006 Panel Study. Here, researchers coded an incomplete, non-random sample of televised ads for the number of times an issue is mentioned (regardless of its importance in the ad overall). Of the 134 ads they coded, they identified economic mentions in 54.5%. In my analysis of the complete sample of ads, I identified economic mentions in 56.8%.

## **CHAPTER 1: TESTS OF THE CONVENTIONAL ECONOMIC VOTING MODEL**

I conducted three tests of the accuracy and validity of electoral predictions derived from the conventional economic voting model. The first is a cross-national test of election outcomes in 114 free and fair presidential elections in 22 countries from 1974 to 2010. Here I regressed a dichotomous measure of incumbent electoral success—equal

to 1 if the incumbent-party candidate won the first round of the election—on a series of economic indicators: annual growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), inflation, and change in unemployment. I also include squared and lagged measures of GDP and inflation. These data were collected from the World Bank World Development Indicators and Database of Political Institutions. The author compiled the electoral data. Logit estimates of this model are presented in Table A1. I then used these coefficient estimates to predict the outcome in each case. Comparing the predicted to the observed outcomes, I generated the results in Table 1.1.

Table A1: Model of Election Outcomes in 22 Democracies, 1974 – 2010

DV=Incumbent Victory	
<i>GDP Growth (per capita, annual %)</i>	0.1443 (0.0967)
<i>Growth</i> <sup>2</sup>	-0.0331** (0.0145)
<i>Growth (t-1)</i>	0.2237 (0.2155)
<i>Growth (t-1)</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.0003 (0.0258)
<i>Inflation (%)</i>	0.0330 (0.0563)
<i>Inflation</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.0005 (0.0003)
<i>Inflation (t-1)</i>	0.0652 (0.1269)
<i>Inflation (t-1)</i> <sup>2</sup>	-0.0064* (0.0033)
<i>Unemployment Change</i>	-0.1665 (0.2374)
<i>Observations</i>	105
<i>Pseudo R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.294

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects are included in the model but suppressed here. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

The second test evaluates the model's performance in the context of U.S. presidential elections from 1880 to 2004. Following Fair's (1976) classic model, I regress the incumbent party candidate's share of the two-party vote on *GROWTH* (the growth of real GDP per capita in the first three quarters of the election year), *INFLATION* (the absolute value of the growth rate of the GDP deflator in the first 15 quarters of the administration), *GOODNEWS* (the number of quarters during the administration in which the annual growth rate of GDP per capita exceeds 3.2), and *REELECTION* (an indicator equal to 1 when an incumbent is standing for reelection). The data come from Fair (2006). Although Fair's (1978) model includes other terms, my aim is to examine the predictive power of the economic context in particular. Variables for war or duration in office, for instance, are thus excluded. Table A2 presents the OLS estimates.

Table A2: Model of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1880 – 2004

DV=Incumbent Victory	
<i>GROWTH</i>	0.47*** (0.15)
<i>INFLATION</i>	-0.55 (0.38)
<i>GOOD NEWS</i>	0.80** (0.28)
<i>REELECTION</i>	4.28** (1.61)
<i>CONSTANT</i>	46.39*** (2.04)
<i>Observations</i>	32
<i>Adjusted R^2</i>	0.57

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

The third test relies on individual-level survey data from the American National Election Study since 1980. Here I regress vote choice for or against the incumbent-party candidate on objective economic context, party identification, age, education, and attention to politics. As with the prior test, the data for the economic variables comes from Fair (2006). Note that I use only vote reports from post-election interviews. Table A3 presents logit estimates of this model. As noted in the text, I use these coefficient estimates to predict each respondent's vote choice. I then compare the predicted vote with the observed vote to generate the totals in Table 1.3 of the main text.

Table A3: Individual-Level Test of the Standard Model, US 1980-2008

	DV=Incumbent Vote
<i>Growth</i>	0.13*** (0.02)
<i>Inflation</i>	-0.01 (0.03)
<i>Good News</i>	0.05*** (0.02)
<i>Standing Incumbent</i>	0.02 (0.09)
<i>Party Identification: In Party</i>	1.63*** (0.10)
<i>Party Identification: Out Party</i>	-1.55*** (0.10)
<i>Attention to Politics</i>	-0.25** (0.10)
<i>Age</i>	0.22 (0.18)
<i>Male</i>	0.07 (0.06)
<i>Constant</i>	-0.42*** (0.16)
<i>Observations</i>	7,510
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.32

Note: Logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

### CHAPTER 3: MEASURING THE ECONOMIC VOTE AND THE 1992 ELECTION

#### Variable Coding

Data from Chapter 3 comes from the 1990-91-92 American National Election Study. Note that, because this three-wave panel study begins in 1990, well before the Democratic candidate in 1992 was chosen, the dependent variable is the feeling thermometer for President George H.W. Bush.

*Bush Feeling Thermometer:* “I’d like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who have been in the news. I’ll read the name of a person and I’d like you to rate that person using something called the feeling thermometer. You can choose any number between 0 and 100. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward that person; the lower the number, the colder or less favorable. George Bush.” Scored 0-100.

*Economy:* “How about the economy in the country as a whole. Would you say that over the past year the nation’s economy has gotten better, stayed about the same or gotten worse?” 0=Much worse, 0.25=Somewhat worse; 0.5=Stayed about the same; 0.75=Somewhat better; 1=Much better.

*Democrat/Republican:* 0=Does not identify with the party, 1=Identifies with the party; Note: “leaners” are categorized as identifiers and “non-identifiers” are the base category in the analysis.

*Ideology:* We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?” This seven-point measure is scaled from 0 to 1 with 0 signifying “extremely liberal” and 1 “extremely conservative.”

*Female:* 1=Female, 0=Male.

*Education:* This seven-point measure of a respondent's educational attainment is scaled from 0 to 1, where 0 represents less than eight years of schooling and 1 signifies that the respondent has received an advanced degree.

*Income:* Household, before-tax income. This twenty-point classification is scaled from 0 to 1.

*Abortion:* "There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of these opinions best agrees with your view?" 1=By law abortion should never be permitted; 0.75=The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger; 0.5=Undecided; 0.25=The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for an abortion has been clearly established; 0=By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

*Death Penalty:* "Do you favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder strongly or not strongly?" 1=Strongly favor, 0.75=Not strongly favor, 0.5=Depends, 0.25=Not strongly oppose, 0=Strongly oppose.

## **CHAPTER 4: MEXICO'S 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

### **Variable Coding**

As noted in the text, I rely on data from the three-wave Mexico 2006 Panel Study. Note that the coding of the variables is identical across all panel waves. The exception is the measure of economic retrospections, which was only measured at Wave 1.

*Vote Intention/Report:* 0=Calderón, 1=Madrazo, 2=López Obrador.

*Economy:* “Since Fox became president, would you say the national economy has gotten better, has gotten worse, or stayed the same?” 0=A lot worse, .025=A little worse, 0.5=Stayed the same, 0.75=A little better, 1=A lot better

*Panista/Priista/Perredista:* 0=Does not identify with the party, 1=Identifies with the party; Note: “leaners” are categorized as identifiers and “non-identifiers” are the base category in the analysis.

*Privatization:* “Do you believe that more private investment should be allowed in the electricity sector or that the electricity sector should remain almost completely in the hands of the government?” 0=Should remain in the hands of government, 1=More privatization should be allowed.

*US Trade:* “What would you prefer: that commercial relations between Mexico and the United States increase, decrease, or remain the same?” 0=Decrease, 0.5=Remain the Same, 1=Increase.

*Security:* “In general, what would you prefer?” 0=That the government be responsible for the well being of individuals, 1=That individuals be responsible for their own well being, 0.5=both.

*Poverty:* “In your opinion, what should the government do to reduce poverty?” 0=Give money to the poor and raise taxes on the rich, 1=Promote private investment and leave taxes as they are, 0.5=both/neither/create jobs.

*Madrazo Probability:* The perceived probability of a Madrazo victory is calculated using responses to: “How likely is it that [candidate] will win the elections in 2006?” 0=Totally certain he will lose, 0.33=Likely he will lose, 0.5=Don’t know, 0.67=Likely he will win, 1=Totally certain he will win. Based on responses for each candidate, the probability equals (Madrazo likelihood)/(Madrazo likelihood + Calderón likelihood + López Obrador likelihood).

*Interest in Politics:* “How much interest do you have in politics?” 0=None, 0.33=A little, 0.66=Some, 1=A lot

*Income:* Socioeconomic status of the respondent’s dwelling. 0=e, 0.25=d, c=.5, b=.75, a=1.

*Female:* 0=Male, 1=Female.

*Religiosity:* 0=Does not belong to a religious association, 0.5=Non-active member, 1=Active member of a religious association.

*Light-Skinned:* 1=White or Light brown; 0=Dark brown or other

*Total Ads:* The total number of campaign ads run in the respondent’s state between the May and July interview (weighted by daypart and television watching habits). Scaled from 0 to 1.

*Economic Ads:* The total number of economic campaign ads run in the respondent’s state between the May and July interviews (weighted by content, daypart, and television watching habits). Scaled from 0 to 1.

### **Estimates of the Economic Vote**

The multinomial logit estimates of the models used to generate the economic voting scores displayed in Figure 4.2 are presented for each wave in Tables A4, A5, and A6 along with estimates of a “sparsely-specified” model. The estimate of the strength of the economic vote (i.e. the marginal effect of *Economy* on the probability of voting for Calderón) is displayed in bold beneath the estimates. The results of the sparse models show that the findings in Chapter 4 are not sensitive to alternative model specifications.

### **Measuring the Economic Message**

I compiled the ad frequency data based on the IFE’s daily monitoring of campaign advertisements. The data record the time, date, price paid, and state of each

Table A4: Economic Priming in the 2006 Mexican Election, Wave 1

DV: Vote Choice/Intent	Wave 1 (October 2005)			
	Madrazo	AMLO	Madrazo	AMLO
<i>Economy</i>	-2.82** (0.83)	-2.67** (0.40)	-2.58** (0.75)	-2.68** (0.47)
<i>Perredista</i>	14.51** (1.06)	17.15** (0.72)	15.19** (0.93)	17.27** (0.67)
<i>Priista</i>	3.19** (0.45)	0.88* (0.44)	3.69** (0.45)	0.96* (0.42)
<i>Panista</i>	-1.67** (0.58)	-2.26** (0.35)	-1.37* (0.54)	-2.23** (0.34)
<i>Privatization</i>	-0.08 (0.41)	0.02 (0.26)		
<i>US Trade</i>	-0.30 (0.51)	-0.07 (0.39)		
<i>Security</i>	-0.14 (0.38)	0.09 (0.30)		
<i>Poverty</i>	-0.28 (0.43)	0.17 (0.36)		
<i>Madrazo Probability</i>	8.35** (1.47)	1.22 (1.15)		
<i>Religiosity</i>	0.22 (0.31)	-0.28 (0.33)		
<i>Light-skinned</i>	-0.53 (0.38)	-0.35 (0.35)		
<i>Income</i>	-2.28** (0.83)	-0.37 (0.72)		
<i>Female</i>	1.07** (0.28)	-0.02 (0.34)		
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	-0.89 (0.71)	-0.38 (0.49)		
<i>Calderón Vote Intent</i>				
<i>Madrazo Vote Intent</i>				
<i>AMLO Vote Intent</i>				
<i>Constant</i>	-0.37 (1.18)	2.28** (0.68)	0.57 (0.69)	2.02** (0.40)
<b>Economic Vote</b>		<b>0.01**</b> ( $<0.01$ )	<b>0.01**</b> ( $<0.01$ )	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.56	0.48	

N=599. Multinomial logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, all independent variables measured using wave 2 responses. "Calderón" is the baseline category. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Table A5: Economic Priming in the 2006 Mexican Election, Wave 2

DV: Vote Choice/Intent	Wave 2 (May 2006)			
	Madrazo	AMLO	Madrazo	AMLO
<i>Economy</i>	-0.68 (0.58)	-1.06* (0.45)	-0.55 (0.63)	-1.02* (0.40)
<i>Perredista</i>	1.09 (0.69)	1.26** (0.46)	1.10 (0.68)	1.34** (0.46)
<i>Priista</i>	1.69* (0.72)	-0.10 (0.35)	1.83** (0.69)	-0.13 (0.37)
<i>Panista</i>	0.76 (0.73)	-0.14 (0.37)	0.82 (0.68)	-0.19 (0.37)
<i>Privatization</i>	-0.02 (0.40)	-0.06 (0.47)		
<i>US Trade</i>	0.02 (0.64)	-0.34 (0.47)		
<i>Security</i>	-0.43 (0.34)	0.00 (0.27)		
<i>Poverty</i>	0.03 (0.33)	-0.21 (0.41)		
<i>Madrazo Probability</i>	2.09** (0.64)	-0.11 (0.63)		
<i>Religiosity</i>	-0.23 (0.30)	-0.30 (0.41)		
<i>Light-skinned</i>	-0.73** (0.28)	-0.37 (0.27)		
<i>Income</i>	-0.94 (0.84)	-1.45* (0.62)		
<i>Female</i>	-0.51 (0.49)	-0.18 (0.28)		
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	-0.29 (0.60)	-0.27 (0.44)		
<i>Calderón Vote Intent</i>	-2.50** (0.87)	-0.01 (0.47)	-3.61** (1.01)	-1.49** (0.45)
<i>Madrazo Vote Intent</i>	1.34 (0.79)	1.85** (0.49)	0.51 (0.83)	0.49 (0.37)
<i>AMLO Vote Intent</i>	-0.56 (0.75)	3.32** (0.53)	-1.61* (0.71)	1.78** (0.34)
<i>Constant</i>				
<b>Economic Vote</b>		<b>0.23*</b> (0.10)	<b>0.21*</b> (0.09)	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.51	0.49	

N=599. Multinomial logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. Independent variables measured using wave 1 responses. "Calderón" is the baseline category. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

Table A6: Economic Priming in the 2006 Mexican Election, Wave 3

DV: Vote Choice/Intent	Wave 3: Post (July 2006)			
	Madrazo	AMLO	Madrazo	AMLO
<i>Economy (W1)</i>	-1.85** (0.59)	-1.53** (0.40)	-1.68* (0.66)	-1.52** (0.37)
<i>Perredista</i>	0.47 (0.64)	1.16** (0.39)	0.47 (0.56)	1.24** (0.43)
<i>Priista</i>	1.04 (0.73)	-0.76* (0.35)	1.08 (0.70)	-0.66 (0.34)
<i>Panista</i>	-0.74 (0.54)	-0.74* (0.36)	-0.76 (0.56)	-0.68* (0.34)
<i>Privatization</i>	-0.09 (0.45)	-0.30 (0.40)		
<i>US Trade</i>	0.19 (0.36)	0.06 (0.30)		
<i>Security</i>	-0.60* (0.29)	0.03 (0.31)		
<i>Poverty</i>	0.05 (0.32)	-0.18 (0.31)		
<i>Madrazo Probability</i>	0.74 (0.85)	-0.07 (0.58)		
<i>Religiosity</i>	0.28 (0.40)	-0.66* (0.31)		
<i>Light-skinned</i>	-0.12 (0.41)	-0.10 (0.27)		
<i>Income</i>	-0.74 (0.68)	-0.82 (0.66)		
<i>Female</i>	-0.85** (0.32)	-0.51 (0.30)		
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.25 (0.63)	-0.38 (0.44)		
<i>Calderón Vote Intent</i>	-1.55 (0.80)	0.55 (0.76)	-2.14** (0.74)	-0.63 (0.47)
<i>Madrazo Vote Intent</i>	1.60* (0.77)	1.89** (0.62)	0.96 (0.59)	0.68 (0.40)
<i>AMLO Vote Intent</i>	0.26 (0.78)	3.35** (0.73)	-0.32 (0.49)	2.16** (0.31)
<i>Constant</i>				
<b>Economic Vote</b>		<b>0.38**</b> (0.09)	<b>0.37**</b> (0.09)	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.46	0.44	

N=599. Multinomial logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, all independent variables measured using wave 2 responses. "Calderón" is the baseline category. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

televised ad. Data is available for Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Distrito Federal, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán. Based on these criteria, 35,191 ads aired in MX 2006. Of these, 19,986 were coded as economic ads.

In order to differentiate the potential impact of individual airings (e.g. a primetime ad versus a late fringe ad), I weight each airing by the time of day in which it was aired. To differentiate viewership by time slot without access to ratings data, I ordered slots based on the average cost per advertising-second. The weighting scheme for the daypart weight is as follows: 0.3 = 2:00-6:00 AM, 0.4 = 6:00-10:00 AM, 0.5 = 10:00 AM-4:30 PM, 0.6 = 11:30 PM-2:00 AM, 0.7 = 4:30-7:30 PM, 0.8 = 7:30-8:00 PM, 0.9 = 11:00-11:30 PM, 1.0 = 8:00-11:00 PM.

Finally, to control for individual-level differences in the likelihood of being exposed to televised campaign ads, I weight each ad measure by the frequency with which respondents watch television. Wave 1 respondents are asked how often they watch television news, soap operas, and soccer games each week (from “not at all” to “daily”). I combined the answers to these questions to create an exposure index. The scaled values from 0 to 1 are used as propensity measures to weight the state-level advertising totals.

In order to measure campaign content, I conducted an original content analysis of all candidate-sponsored presidential campaign advertisements (the coding method is described earlier in this Appendix). I collected 307 television spots from the three major candidates for MX 2006. After weighting the ads by the centrality of the economic message, I combined this measure of campaign content with the measure of campaign effort by multiplying the content weight by the daypart weight. The sum of these scores by state captures the intensity of the economic message.

### **Testing the Mechanism: the Salience of the Economy**

Did the salience of economic considerations increase with exposure to the economic message as priming theory predicts? As described in the main text, I evaluated this possibility by regressing a measure of economic salience on exposure to economic ads. I defined economic salience as a binary variable that equals 1 if a respondent reported an economic issue as the most important problem facing the nation. The results in Table 4.2 show that exposure to economic messages increased the probability of reporting an economic issue as the most important issue facing the nation. As a robustness check, I reestimate these models using a different measure of salience. Here I define salience as a binary variable that equals 1 if the respondent reported that at least one of the candidates was focusing most on economic issues in his campaign ads and 0 otherwise. Logit estimates of these models are presented in Table A7 (next page) and confirm the results presented in the main text. Exposure to economic ads significantly increased the salience of the economy in voters' minds. It is unlikely that this effect is observed by chance ( $p < 0.05$  in both models).

## **CHAPTER 5: THE DEACTIVATING 2000 ELECTIONS IN MEXICO AND THE U.S.**

Here I proceed by case, beginning with the 2000 U.S. election.

### **Variable Coding, US 2000**

As noted in the text, I use data from the Annenberg National Election Study. The coding of the variables below is constant across panel waves and across the 22 periods of the cross-sectional data.

*Vote Intention/Report:* -1=Bush, 1=Gore, 0=Undecided or preference for another candidate.

Table A7: The Effect of Ads on The Salience of Economic Considerations, MX 2006

	DV: Candidate Focus – Economic Issues (Wave 3)	
<i>Economic Campaign Ads</i>	63.70** (17.99)	65.65** (17.16)
<i>Total Campaign Ads</i>	-42.37** (12.01)	-43.76** (11.48)
<i>Candidates' Focus:</i>	1.41**	1.29**
<i>Economy</i>	(0.19)	(0.19)
<i>Perredista</i>	0.25 (0.28)	0.27 (0.32)
<i>Priista</i>	0.14 (0.42)	0.14 (0.40)
<i>Panista</i>	0.05 (0.38)	-0.12 (0.38)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>		0.49 (0.29)
<i>Privatization</i>		0.29 (0.15)
<i>US Trade</i>		0.36 (0.21)
<i>Security</i>		0.38* (0.15)
<i>Poverty</i>		-0.08 (0.22)
<i>Religiosity</i>		-0.21 (0.30)
<i>Light-skinned</i>		0.26 (0.20)
<i>Income</i>		0.94 (0.50)
<i>Female</i>		0.12 (0.22)
<i>Constant</i>	-0.11 (0.33)	-1.32** (0.39)
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.09	0.12

N=400. Logit estimates with robust standard errors (clustered by state) in parentheses. All variables are measured using Wave 2 responses and are scaled from 0 to 1. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

*Economic Retrospections:* “How would you rate economic conditions in this country today?” -1=Poor, -0.33=Fair, 0.33=Good, 1=Excellent.

*Democrat/Republican:* 0=Does not identify with the party, 1=Identifies with the party; Note: “leaners” are categorized as identifiers and “non-identifiers” are the base category in the analysis.

*Policy Index:* The index, from -1 to 1, equals the sum (equally weighted) of stated positions on gay marriage, the death penalty, tax policy, and military spending. Negative scores reflect liberal positions, and positive scores reflect typically conservative positions. Question wording and scoring on each component of this index are available upon request. Note that the death penalty question was not asked in Wave 2 of the panel, so I replaced it with positions on handgun control.

*Interest in Politics:* “Some people seem to follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there is an election or not. Others are not that interested. Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then or hardly at all?” -1=Hardly at all, -0.33=Now and then, 0.33=Some of the time, 1=Most of the time.

*Income:* “Last year, what was your total household income before taxes?” -1=Less than \$10,000, -0.75=\$10,000-\$15,000, -0.5=\$15,000-\$25,000, -0.25=\$25,000-\$35,000, 0=\$35,000-\$50,000, 0.25=\$50,000-\$75,000, 0.5=\$75,000-\$100,000, 0.75=\$100,000-\$150,000, 1=More than \$150,000.

*Female:* 0=Male, 1=Female.

*Education:* “What is the last grade or class you completed in school?” -1=Grade 8 or lower, -0.75=Some high school, -0.5=High school diploma or equivalent, -0.25=Technical or vocational school after high school, 0=Some college, 0.25=Associate’s or two-year degree, 0.5=Four-year college degree, 0.75=Some graduate or profession school, 1=Graduate or professional degree.

## Estimates of the Correspondence and Priming Effects, US 2000

Figure 5.3 in the main text charts the strength of the “correspondence effect” over the course of the 2000 U.S. presidential election. As described in Chapter 5, I generate these estimates by first regressing vote intention on evaluations of past national economic performance and a series of control variables. All variables are measured contemporaneously. I divide the NAES National Cross Section Study into 22 time periods of approximately equal sample size. Ordered logit estimates for all 22 are presented below in Tables A8, A9 and A10.

Table A8: The Correspondence Effect, US 2000 April 1-July 31

DV: Vote Preference	(1) Apr	(2) May	(3) Jun	(4) Jul 1-10	(5) Jul 11-17	(6) Jul 18-24	(7) Jul 25-31
<i>Economy</i>	0.136 (0.124)	0.065 (0.131)	0.172 (0.127)	0.251* (0.143)	0.064 (0.111)	0.035 (0.109)	0.072 (0.112)
<i>Democrat</i>	1.684*** (0.175)	1.326*** (0.188)	1.248*** (0.179)	1.502*** (0.204)	1.377*** (0.159)	1.273*** (0.158)	1.427*** (0.157)
<i>Republican</i>	-1.782*** (0.196)	-1.780*** (0.202)	-1.844*** (0.199)	-1.619*** (0.222)	-1.702*** (0.169)	-2.222*** (0.175)	-1.994*** (0.173)
<i>Policy Index</i>	-0.869*** (0.216)	-1.202*** (0.209)	-1.229*** (0.221)	-1.171*** (0.245)	-1.548*** (0.191)	-1.272*** (0.187)	-1.585*** (0.193)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	-0.005 (0.105)	0.332*** (0.104)	0.029 (0.107)	0.069 (0.117)	0.288*** (0.090)	0.134 (0.088)	0.084 (0.090)
<i>Female</i>	0.031 (0.135)	0.348*** (0.134)	0.371*** (0.139)	0.411*** (0.153)	0.397*** (0.118)	-0.012 (0.118)	0.169 (0.118)
<i>Income</i>	-0.056 (0.151)	-0.216 (0.145)	-0.288* (0.152)	-0.590*** (0.178)	-0.016 (0.134)	-0.327** (0.130)	0.011 (0.131)
<i>Education</i>	0.243* (0.140)	0.072 (0.131)	0.217 (0.139)	0.321** (0.156)	-0.054 (0.123)	0.049 (0.119)	0.082 (0.121)
<i>Cut 1</i>	-0.365** (0.163)	-0.231 (0.184)	-0.476*** (0.170)	-0.064 (0.191)	-0.491*** (0.150)	-0.758*** (0.151)	-0.505*** (0.152)
<i>Cut 2</i>	0.540*** (0.164)	0.633*** (0.186)	0.536*** (0.171)	0.855*** (0.194)	0.601*** (0.150)	0.163 (0.150)	0.442*** (0.153)
<b>Correspondence Effect</b>	0.0199 (0.0181)	0.0096 (0.0193)	0.0264 (0.0195)	0.0362* (0.0206)	0.0095 (0.0166)	0.0048 (0.0152)	0.001 (0.0154)
Observations	1,272	1,275	1,174	971	1,527	1,764	1,746
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.277	0.266	0.254	0.270	0.256	0.303	0.304

Note: Ordered logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A9: The Correspondence Effect, US 2000 April 1-September 4

DV: Vote Preference	(8) Aug 1-7	(9) Aug 8-14	(10) Aug 15-21	(11) Aug 22-28	(12) Aug 29-4 Sep	(13) Sep 5-11	(14) Sep 12-18
<i>Economy</i>	0.224** (0.113)	0.256** (0.114)	0.250** (0.113)	0.167 (0.119)	0.260** (0.113)	0.310*** (0.111)	0.466*** (0.113)
<i>Democrat</i>	1.293*** (0.158)	1.472*** (0.165)	1.525*** (0.162)	1.629*** (0.163)	1.563*** (0.166)	1.411*** (0.157)	1.646*** (0.166)
<i>Republican</i>	-1.973*** (0.174)	-2.005*** (0.180)	-2.146*** (0.177)	-2.005*** (0.173)	-1.709*** (0.174)	-1.788*** (0.166)	-1.509*** (0.171)
<i>Policy Index</i>	-1.049*** (0.187)	-1.363*** (0.193)	-1.012*** (0.193)	-1.708*** (0.197)	-1.613*** (0.198)	-1.418*** (0.179)	-1.737*** (0.193)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.105 (0.090)	0.194** (0.094)	0.200** (0.093)	0.047 (0.092)	0.060 (0.091)	0.265*** (0.089)	0.047 (0.090)
<i>Female</i>	0.076 (0.118)	0.317*** (0.122)	0.272** (0.120)	0.175 (0.119)	0.155 (0.119)	0.211* (0.113)	0.291** (0.115)
<i>Income</i>	-0.377*** (0.126)	-0.273** (0.133)	0.199 (0.127)	-0.042 (0.134)	-0.412*** (0.133)	0.040 (0.127)	-0.226* (0.130)
<i>Education</i>	0.242** (0.116)	-0.104 (0.121)	-0.000 (0.118)	-0.021 (0.122)	0.073 (0.120)	-0.155 (0.112)	-0.017 (0.117)
<i>Cut 1</i>	-0.221 (0.150)	-0.302* (0.154)	-0.475*** (0.147)	-0.684*** (0.156)	-0.627*** (0.161)	-0.484*** (0.151)	-0.487*** (0.160)
<i>Cut 2</i>	0.585*** (0.151)	0.591*** (0.155)	0.394*** (0.147)	0.176 (0.155)	0.267* (0.160)	0.408*** (0.151)	0.402** (0.160)
<b>Correspondence Effect</b>	0.0323** (0.0163)	0.0341** (0.0152)	0.0332** (0.0149)	0.0212 (0.0151)	0.0361** (0.0157)	0.0451*** (0.0161)	0.0654*** (0.0157)
Observations	1,776	1,732	1,785	1,880	1,716	1,808	1,797
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.273	0.317	0.319	0.340	0.299	0.277	0.293

Note: Ordered logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Turning to the results of the test for priming of the economic vote, Columns 1, 3 and 6 of Table A11 present the ordered logit estimates used to generate the economic voting scores displayed in Figure 5.4. The data come from the three-wave NAES Multiple Reinterview Panel A. As a check on the results of the fully specified models, Table A11 also presents estimates of sparsely-specified models. Although there is some variability in the point estimates for the strength of the economic vote, there are no substantive differences across the models. In all cases, economic retrospections have, on average, no effect on vote preferences.

Table A10: The Correspondence Effect, US 2000 April 1-August 28

DV: Vote Preference	(15) Sep 19-25	(16) Sep 26-2 Oct	(17) Oct 3-9	(18) Oct 10-16	(19) Oct 17-23	(20) Oct 24-30	(21) Oct 31-6 Nov	(22) Nov 8-30 (Post)
<i>Economy</i>	0.322*** (0.115)	0.059 (0.115)	0.218* (0.114)	0.296** (0.119)	0.280** (0.118)	0.302*** (0.116)	0.163 (0.124)	0.374** (0.151)
<i>Democrat</i>	1.507*** (0.165)	1.677*** (0.159)	1.718*** (0.159)	1.721*** (0.162)	1.803*** (0.166)	1.822*** (0.156)	1.933*** (0.176)	2.210*** (0.216)
<i>Republican</i>	-1.744*** (0.173)	-1.651*** (0.163)	-1.558*** (0.164)	-1.829*** (0.172)	-1.665*** (0.176)	-1.447*** (0.162)	-1.772*** (0.184)	-2.050*** (0.220)
<i>Policy Index</i>	-1.455*** (0.191)	-1.565*** (0.193)	-1.425*** (0.191)	-1.496*** (0.196)	-1.542*** (0.197)	-1.841*** (0.193)	-1.229*** (0.200)	-1.345*** (0.228)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.062 (0.090)	0.040 (0.089)	0.104 (0.093)	-0.027 (0.094)	0.053 (0.094)	0.077 (0.095)	0.015 (0.099)	0.205 (0.131)
<i>Female</i>	0.248** (0.119)	0.175 (0.116)	0.114 (0.117)	0.366*** (0.120)	0.165 (0.121)	0.131 (0.116)	0.379*** (0.124)	0.238 (0.148)
<i>Income</i>	-0.018 (0.127)	-0.100 (0.129)	-0.241* (0.129)	-0.089 (0.132)	-0.146 (0.136)	-0.379*** (0.130)	-0.068 (0.138)	-0.230 (0.164)
<i>Education</i>	0.006 (0.123)	0.054 (0.119)	-0.095 (0.117)	-0.139 (0.121)	-0.088 (0.126)	-0.150 (0.118)	0.291** (0.128)	-0.084 (0.145)
<i>Cut 1</i>	-0.641*** (0.159)	-0.625*** (0.152)	-0.524*** (0.149)	-0.442*** (0.152)	-0.427*** (0.156)	-0.442*** (0.147)	-0.216 (0.169)	-0.004 (0.214)
<i>Cut 2</i>	0.107 (0.158)	0.198 (0.151)	0.366** (0.148)	0.436*** (0.152)	0.469*** (0.156)	0.355** (0.147)	0.584*** (0.170)	0.480** (0.215)
<b>Correspondence Effect</b>	0.0454*** (0.0161)	0.008 (0.0156)	0.0301* (0.0157)	0.0376** (0.0151)	0.0369** (0.0155)	0.0408*** (0.0156)	0.0201 (0.0154)	0.0356** (0.0143)
Observations	1,737	1,831	1,733	1,809	1,730	1,795	1,748	1,757
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.294	0.302	0.292	0.334	0.323	0.307	0.348	0.460

Note: Ordered logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

### Variable Coding, MX 2000

As noted in the text, I use data from the four-wave Mexico 2000 Panel Study.

The coding of the variables below is constant across panel waves.

*Vote Intention/Report*: 0=Labastida, 1=Fox, 2=Cárdenas.

*Economic Retrospection*: “In the last 12 months, would you say that the national economy has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same?” 0=A lot worse, 0.25=A little worse, 0.5=Stayed the same, 0.75=A little better, 1=A lot better.

Table A11: A 3-Wave Test of Economic Priming, US 2000

DV: Vote Choice/ Vote Intention	<b>Wave 1 (Aug 4-13)</b>		<b>Wave 2 (Oct 18-31)</b>		<b>Wave 3 (Post-Election)</b>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(6)	(7)
<i>Economy (<math>b'_{wt}</math>)</i>	0.100 (0.278)	0.182 (0.252)	0.424 (0.323)	0.165 (0.292)	0.135 (0.310)	0.026 (0.287)
<i>Democrat</i>	1.489*** (0.446)	1.531*** (0.420)	1.293** (0.554)	1.068* (0.546)	1.434*** (0.539)	1.374*** (0.528)
<i>Republican</i>	-2.486*** (0.507)	-3.105*** (0.466)	-0.636 (0.588)	-1.186** (0.557)	-0.624 (0.581)	-1.075** (0.545)
<i>Wave 1 Vote Choice</i>	- -	- -	1.858*** (0.226)	1.997*** (0.219)	1.578*** (0.217)	1.705*** (0.209)
<i>Policy Preferences</i>	-1.806*** (0.404)	- -	-1.333*** (0.475)	- -	-1.370*** (0.467)	- -
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.343 (0.244)	- -	-0.015 (0.293)	- -	-0.367 (0.280)	- -
<i>Income</i>	-0.251 (0.309)	- -	-0.688* (0.360)	- -	-0.257 (0.348)	- -
<i>Education</i>	-0.317 (0.280)	- -	-0.355 (0.322)	- -	-0.155 (0.317)	- -
<i>Female</i>	-0.144 (0.295)	- -	0.327 (0.342)	- -	0.040 (0.334)	- -
<i>Cut 1</i>	-0.492 (0.495)	-0.466 (0.392)	-0.402 (0.581)	-0.710 (0.500)	-0.581 (0.560)	-0.402 (0.478)
<i>Cut 2</i>	0.400 (0.493)	0.379 (0.391)	0.469 (0.580)	0.117 (0.498)	0.049 (0.558)	0.205 (0.476)
<b>Strength of the Economic Vote (<math>\psi_i</math>)</b>	0.010 (0.027)	0.019 (0.026)	0.028 (0.021)	0.011 (0.019)	0.010 (0.023)	0.002 (0.022)
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.458	0.428	0.562	0.544	0.538	0.522

Note: N = 441. Ordered logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. All independent variables are measured at Wave 1. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

*Panista/Priista/Perredista*: 0=Does not identify with the party, 1=Identifies with the party; Note: “leaners” are categorized as identifiers and “non-identifiers” are the base category in the analysis.

*Privatization*: “With which of the following phrases do you most agree?” 0=Privatizing the electric industry would be bad for the country, 1=The electric industry should be privatized to make it more efficient.

*Poverty*: “With which of the following phrases do you most agree?” 0= The government should do more to reduce the differences between rich and poor, 1=Attempts

by the government to reduce the differences between rich and poor cause more problems than they solve.

*Risk Taker:* I am going to read two sayings; please tell me which of the two is closest to your way of thinking?" 0=Better the devil you know than the saint you don't, 1=Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

*Interest in Politics:* "How much interest do you have in politics?" 0=None, 0.33=A little, 0.66=Some, 1=A lot.

*Income:* Socioeconomic status of the respondent's dwelling. 0=f 0.2=e, d=.4, c=.6, b=.8, a=1.

*Female:* 0=Male, 1=Female.

*Education:* 0=No schooling, 0.25=primary, 0.5=secondary, 0.75=preparatory, 1=college.

### **Estimates of the Correspondence and Priming Effects, MX 2000**

Multinomial logit estimates of the model used to generate the correspondence effects in Figure 5.6 of the main text are presented in Table A12. Estimates of the multi-wave test of economic priming are presented below in Table A13. These results were used to generate the point estimates in Figure 5.7. As a robustness check, I also estimated a sparsely specified model for each panel wave and one that excludes the lagged dependent variable. Multinomial logit estimates of these models are given in Table A15.

Table A12: Estimating the Correspondence Effect, MX 2000

DV: Vote Choice/ Vote Intention	WAVE 1 February 19 - 27		WAVE 4 (Post-Elec): July 7 - 16	
	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas
<i>Economy (<math>b_t</math>)</i>	-0.569*** (0.216)	-0.728** (0.285)	-0.266 (0.218)	-0.813*** (0.310)
<i>PAN Identifier</i>	2.561*** (0.294)	-0.237 (0.488)	2.052*** (0.457)	0.619 (0.624)
<i>PRI Identifier</i>	-2.863*** (0.219)	-3.385*** (0.386)	-1.558*** (0.214)	-2.628*** (0.447)
<i>PRD Identifier</i>	-0.733* (0.443)	2.669*** (0.354)	1.996*** (0.749)	3.751*** (0.757)
<i>Policy Index</i>	-0.056 (0.137)	-0.279 (0.186)	0.099 (0.196)	-0.416 (0.304)
<i>Risk Taker</i>	0.858*** (0.201)	0.378 (0.272)	1.928*** (0.222)	1.540*** (0.355)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.345** (0.167)	0.452** (0.221)	-0.157 (0.172)	-0.256 (0.249)
<i>Income Proxy</i>	0.251 (0.221)	-0.221 (0.295)	0.173 (0.274)	0.144 (0.392)
<i>Female</i>	-0.153 (0.191)	-0.514** (0.255)	-0.007 (0.201)	0.143 (0.291)
<i>Education</i>	0.496*** (0.176)	0.293 (0.231)	-0.104 (0.188)	-0.124 (0.274)
<i>Constant</i>	0.022 (0.249)	-0.726** (0.323)	-0.334 (0.261)	-1.896*** (0.418)
<b>Strength of the Correspondence Effect (<math>\phi_i</math>)</b>	0.148** (0.052)		0.061 (0.039)	
<i>Observations</i>	1380		806	
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.521		0.305	

Note: Multinomial logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. "Labastida" is the omitted category. Continuous and ordinal variables are scaled from -1 to 1. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Table A13: A Multi-Wave Test of Economic Priming, MX 2000

DV: Vote Choice/ Vote Intention	WAVE 1 February 19 - 27		WAVE 2 April 28 - 7 May		WAVE 3 June 3 - 18		WAVE 4 (Post-Elec): July 7 - 16	
	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas
<i>Economy (<math>b'_{wt}</math>)</i>	-1.018*** (0.364)	-0.431 (0.454)	0.418 (0.498)	-0.137 (0.560)	-0.194 (0.418)	-0.426 (0.481)	0.089 (0.296)	-0.432 (0.381)
<i>PAN Identifier</i>	2.970*** (0.528)	0.148 (0.794)	-0.581 (0.817)	-1.413 (0.967)	-0.169 (0.656)	-0.963 (0.772)	0.016 (0.503)	-0.540 (0.646)
<i>PRI Identifier</i>	-2.995*** (0.386)	-3.210*** (0.597)	-1.129* (0.614)	-1.014 (0.773)	-0.531 (0.500)	-1.409** (0.560)	-0.683* (0.367)	-0.698 (0.510)
<i>PRD Identifier</i>	-0.539 (0.665)	3.026*** (0.567)	-0.154 (0.925)	2.299*** (0.829)	0.270 (0.881)	1.148 (0.717)	0.162 (0.594)	0.955 (0.600)
<i>Policy Index</i>	-0.122 (0.236)	-0.578* (0.299)	-0.469 (0.310)	-1.149*** (0.371)	-0.034 (0.255)	-0.363 (0.301)	-0.187 (0.180)	-0.156 (0.239)
<i>Risk Taker</i>	0.978*** (0.346)	0.685 (0.431)	0.327 (0.446)	0.677 (0.516)	0.832** (0.382)	0.871* (0.451)	0.562** (0.261)	1.082*** (0.374)
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.715** (0.289)	0.188 (0.359)	0.347 (0.376)	1.018** (0.434)	0.210 (0.303)	0.133 (0.343)	0.031 (0.223)	0.157 (0.284)
<i>Income Proxy</i>	-0.176 (0.397)	-0.250 (0.492)	-0.466 (0.502)	-0.693 (0.586)	-0.170 (0.440)	-0.998* (0.539)	-0.220 (0.305)	-0.560 (0.405)
<i>Female</i>	0.060 (0.328)	-0.148 (0.403)	0.586 (0.452)	0.753 (0.528)	0.702* (0.372)	0.144 (0.411)	0.134 (0.261)	-0.583* (0.338)
<i>Education</i>	0.554* (0.307)	0.547 (0.387)	0.013 (0.425)	0.328 (0.498)	0.737** (0.326)	0.936** (0.378)	0.564** (0.248)	0.559* (0.318)
<i>Labastida Vote</i>	- (0.307)	- (0.387)	-2.123*** (0.425)	-3.446*** (0.498)	-2.058*** (0.326)	-2.240*** (0.378)	-1.021** (0.248)	-2.230*** (0.318)
<i>Fox Vote</i>	- (0.307)	- (0.387)	2.937*** (0.425)	0.303 (0.498)	1.705** (0.326)	-0.327 (0.378)	1.942*** (0.248)	-0.490 (0.318)
<i>Cárdenas Vote</i>	- (0.307)	- (0.387)	-0.460 (0.425)	-0.742 (0.498)	-1.649** (0.326)	-0.300 (0.378)	0.023 (0.248)	0.254 (0.318)
<i>Constant</i>	-0.394 (0.437)	-1.244** (0.529)	- (0.425)	- (0.498)	- (0.326)	- (0.378)	- (0.248)	- (0.318)
<b>Strength of the Economic Vote (<math>\psi_i</math>)</b>	0.225*** (0.086)		-0.068 (0.114)		0.059 (0.089)		0.003 (0.061)	
<i>Observations</i>	548		333		355		548	
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.561		0.524		0.426		0.345	

Note: Multinomial logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. “Labastida” is the omitted category. All independent variables are measured at Wave 1. Continuous and ordinal variables are scaled from -1 to 1. The “constant” is omitted in the models for wave 2 to 4 because lagged vote choice is included as a set of dummy variables. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Table A14: Robustness of the Deactivating Effect, Mexico 2000

DV=Vote Choice	Wave 1		Wave 2		Wave 3		Wave 4	
	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas	Fox	Cárdenas
<i>Economy</i>	-1.84** (0.69)	-0.84 (0.88)	0.70 (0.96)	-0.61 (1.06)	-0.19 (0.79)	-0.66 (0.91)	0.18 (0.57)	-0.79 (0.73)
<i>Panista</i>	2.96** (0.51)	0.10 (0.78)	-0.56 (0.80)	-1.27 (0.94)	-0.14 (0.64)	-0.93 (0.75)	0.03 (0.49)	-0.49 (0.64)
<i>Priista</i>	-3.05** (0.35)	-3.37** (0.58)	-0.89 (0.59)	-0.74 (0.71)	-0.44 (0.47)	-1.34* (0.52)	-0.76* (0.35)	-0.86 (0.49)
<i>Perredista</i>	-0.58 (0.62)	2.72** (0.52)	-0.36 (0.88)	1.76** (0.73)	0.18 (0.85)	0.84 (0.68)	-0.01 (0.58)	0.77 (0.57)
<i>Prior Labastida Vote</i>			-1.90** (0.68)	-1.99** (0.74)	-1.10 (0.59)	-0.88 (0.63)	-0.59 (0.43)	-1.20* (0.55)
<i>Prior Fox Intent</i>			3.13** (0.81)	1.81* (0.87)	2.88** (0.66)	1.28 (0.74)	2.51** (0.48)	0.82 (0.58)
<i>Prior Cárdenas Vote</i>			-0.07 (0.77)	0.80 (0.74)	-0.43 (0.75)	1.38* (0.65)	0.59 (0.56)	1.44* (0.58)
<i>Constant</i>	1.23** (0.38)	-0.17 (0.49)						
<b><i>Economic Vote</i></b>	<b>0.41**</b> (0.16)		<b>-0.08</b> (0.21)		<b>0.07</b> (0.17)		<b>0.01</b> (0.12)	
<i>Observations</i>	548		333		355		548	
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.54		0.50		0.40		0.32	

Note: Multinomial logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. "Labastida" is the baseline category. All independent variables are measured using Wave 1 responses. All variables scaled 0 to 1. \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05.

## CHAPTER 6: EVALUATING THE GENERALIZABILITY OF THE PRIMING-BASED MODEL

Here I provide full estimates and essential details on variable scoring for the tests presented in Chapter 6. For the sake of space, however, I do not provide complete details (available upon request). Note also that the estimates are all presented at the end of this section.

### South Korea, 2007

The data in this section come from the 2007 South Korean Presidential Election Panel Study. In order to measure the strength of the economic vote, I estimated a model

of vote preference—for or against the incumbent UNDP candidate Chung Dong-young—at three panel waves. Note that I chose these three panel waves because economic retrospections were measured in the prior waves and to maximize the number of participants while maintaining a fairly regular gap between waves. I regressed vote preference on economic retrospections and lagged vote preference. In the “fully-specified” models, I also include a series of control variables, including indicators for residence in Jeolla or Gyeong provinces. Because of the weakness of party identification, especially relative to residence, I do not include this control in the models. I code all variables from 0 to 1 to reflect left-right, less-more, and worse-better distinctions. Table A15 presents the logit estimates of these models at each panel wave. Once again, the estimates of the strength of the economic vote are robust to alternate specifications.

#### **Canada, 2006**

To evaluate the change in the economic vote over the course of the 2006 Canadian federal election, I relied on data from the 2004 and 2006 Canadian Election Surveys. Specifically, I use the post-election wave from 2004 as the first wave, the pre-election wave in 2006 as the second, and the post-election wave in 2006 as the third wave. I regress vote preference—for or against the incumbent Liberal party—on prior vote preference, economic retrospections, and a series of control variables. The sparse models for this election do not include the additional controls. Table A16 presents the logit estimates for both specifications and the estimated marginal effect of economic retrospections.

#### **West Germany, 1972**

The analysis of the 1972 Bundestag elections relies on data from the three-wave 1972 German Election Panel Study. To evaluate the strength of the economic vote, I

regress vote preference—a binary measure equal to 1 for the SPD/FDP coalition—on prior vote, economic retrospections, party identification, income, gender, and age. I also estimate a sparsely-specified model that includes only the lagged dependent variable and economic opinion. All independent variables are measured using responses from the prior study wave. Note that the variables are all scaled from 0 to 1. Table A17 presents logit estimates of these models and the estimated strength of the economic vote.

Table A15: Evaluating the Economic Vote, South Korea 2007

DV: Incumbent Vote Preference	<b>Wave 3</b> (Oct 17-20)		<b>Wave 4</b> (Nov 25-27)		<b>Wave 5</b> (Dec 11-12)	
<i>Economy</i>	0.87*** (0.30)	0.67** (0.31)	1.46*** (0.31)	1.28*** (0.33)	1.85*** (0.31)	1.70*** (0.33)
<i>Prior Vote</i>	1.66*** (0.15)	1.53*** (0.16)	1.79*** (0.15)	1.67*** (0.17)	1.96*** (0.15)	1.86*** (0.17)
<i>Ideology</i>		-0.38 (0.36)		-0.83** (0.38)		-1.13*** (0.37)
<i>Female</i>		-0.03 (0.14)		0.15 (0.15)		0.10 (0.15)
<i>Education</i>		-0.83** (0.34)		-0.96*** (0.36)		-0.79** (0.35)
<i>Income</i>		-0.20 (0.38)		0.05 (0.39)		0.01 (0.39)
<i>Age</i>		-0.65*** (0.24)		-0.54** (0.25)		-0.41* (0.24)
<i>Jeolla</i>		1.56*** (0.18)		1.80*** (0.18)		2.11*** (0.18)
<i>Gyeong</i>		0.08 (0.18)		-0.10 (0.19)		-0.20 (0.19)
<i>Constant</i>	-2.35*** (0.14)	-1.53*** (0.35)	-2.69*** (0.15)	-1.83*** (0.37)	-2.73*** (0.15)	-1.88*** (0.37)
<b>Economic Vote</b>	<b>0.10***</b> (0.04)	<b>0.07**</b> (0.03)	<b>0.16***</b> (0.03)	<b>0.13***</b> (0.03)	<b>0.22***</b> (0.04)	<b>0.18***</b> (0.03)
Observations	1,911	1,911	1,911	1,911	1,911	1,911
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0803	0.134	0.105	0.181	0.130	0.227

Note: Logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. All independent variables are measured using responses from the prior panel wave. All variables scaled 0 to 1. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.10.

Table A16: Evaluating the Economic Vote, Canada 2006

DV: Vote Preference for the Liberals	Wave2		Wave 3: Post Election	
	Sparse	Full	Sparse	Full
<i>Prior Vote</i>	3.10*** (0.37)	3.38*** (0.45)	2.75*** (0.34)	2.79*** (0.38)
<i>Economy</i>	0.83 (0.51)	1.16** (0.55)	0.75 (0.54)	0.82 (0.57)
<i>Female</i>		0.87** (0.39)		-0.03 (0.37)
<i>Quebecer</i>		-1.13* (0.67)		-0.52 (0.63)
<i>Privatization of Health Care</i>		-0.90** (0.40)		-0.60 (0.38)
<i>Corruption</i>		-0.42 (0.56)		-0.02 (0.56)
<i>U.S. Ties</i>		-0.83 (0.63)		-0.95 (0.69)
<i>Gun Registry</i>		1.15 (0.77)		-1.98*** (0.65)
<i>Constant</i>	-2.49*** (0.32)	-3.01*** (1.00)	-2.93*** (0.45)	-0.59 (0.84)
<b><i>Economic Vote</i></b>	<b>0.12*</b> (0.07)	<b>0.14**</b> (0.06)	<b>0.09</b> (0.06)	<b>0.09</b> (0.06)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.274	0.351	0.258	0.308

Note: Logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. All independent variables scaled from 0 to 1 and measured using responses from the prior panel wave. N=314. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

Table A17: Evaluating the Economic Vote, West Germany 1972

DV: Vote Preference for SPD/FDP	Wave2 (Oct 20 – 6 Nov)		Wave 3: Post Election (Dec 9 – 30)	
	Sparse	Full	Sparse	Full
<i>Prior Vote</i>	5.37*** (0.33)	4.07*** (0.39)	4.74*** (0.30)	2.94*** (0.38)
<i>Economy</i>	1.31* (0.78)	1.54* (0.84)	1.22 (0.83)	0.32 (0.88)
<i>Party Identification</i>		-3.24*** (0.71)		-4.64*** (0.74)
<i>Income</i>		-0.53 (0.84)		-0.90 (0.74)
<i>Female</i>		0.08 (0.35)		-0.04 (0.31)
<i>Age</i>		-0.81 (0.83)		0.45 (0.73)
<i>Constant</i>	-3.03*** (0.50)	-0.63 (0.85)	-2.86*** (0.54)	0.71 (0.93)
<b><i>Economic Vote</i></b>	<b>0.25*</b> (0.15)	<b>0.27*</b> (0.15)	<b>0.25</b> (0.17)	<b>0.06</b> (0.17)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.67	0.69	0.59	0.64

Note: Logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. All independent variables scaled from 0 to 1 and measured using responses from the prior panel wave. N=647. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

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