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Economic Voting Appeals in Congressional Campaigns

PHILIP EDWARD JONES

Although they agree that economics and elections are intertwined, theories of economic voting disagree on the policy focus (on positions taken or outcomes achieved) and time horizon (retrospective or prospective) that guides voters' decisions. Most research on these debates looks at the considerations voters weigh. Instead, I explore the types of economic voting that candidates encourage through their campaign appeals. Content-coded advertising data from the 2004 congressional elections show that appeals focus more on policy positions than outcomes and more on the past than the future. Consistent with predictions from emphasis allocation theory, strategic incentives and electoral context shape the exact mix of economic appeals campaigns make. When promoting their own candidacy, politicians ask voters to think about (more unifying) future economic outcomes; when attacking their opponent's candidacy, they ask voters to think about (more divisive) past policy positions. In districts experiencing worsening economic conditions, voters are exposed to more information about policy outcomes; in districts where the incumbent is ideologically "out of step," they hear more about policy positions. Studies that seek to evaluate competing theories of economic voting are thus likely to draw misleading conclusions if they treat the information environment as a homogeneous constant: Campaigns in different districts, facing different strategic incentives, encourage significantly different types of economic voting.

Keywords economic voting, campaign advertising

“When you think economics, think elections;
When you think elections, think economics.”

— Edward Tufte (1978, p. 65)

Introduction

That researchers should “think economics” when they “think elections” is by now an uncontroversial recommendation. The exact type of economic considerations that shape election outcomes is, however, the subject of considerable debate. Scholars have advanced multiple theories of economic voting: some suggest that voters focus on economic policy *positions*, comparing and contrasting the stances candidates take. Others argue that voters focus on

Philip Edward Jones is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Delaware.

Address correspondence to Philip Edward Jones, University of Delaware, Department of Political Science and International Relations, 347 Smith Hall, Newark, DE 19716, USA. E-mail: pejones@udel.edu

economic policy *outcomes*, prioritizing ends over the means used to attain them. Some suggest that voters look to the future, that elections depend on *prospective* expectations of what candidates will do if elected. Others argue that voters look to the past, portraying elections as *retrospective* judgments of what politicians have done in office.

Most of the empirical work based on these theories has focused on the ways voters make their decisions, using survey data or election returns from congressional and presidential races (see, for example, Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Kuklinski & West, 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1992; Miller & Wattenberg, 1985; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). Almost no attention has been paid to the particular types of economic voting that campaigns encourage—to how candidates themselves ask voters to “think economics.” This overwhelming focus on voters’ choices misses much of the politics connecting economics and elections. As Franklin (1991) argues more generally,

The political nature of elections lies in the choices candidates make about strategy. How to present oneself and one’s opponent to the voters is the critical electoral heresthetic. . . . As we have become adept at studying voters, it is ironic that we have virtually ignored the study of candidates. Yet it is in candidate behavior that politics intrudes into voting behavior. Without the candidates, there is only the psychology of vote choice and none of the politics. (pp. 1210–1211)

This study reorients the debates about economic voting by exploring how and why candidates for the U.S. Congress discuss economics. A growing body of literature examines why campaigns choose to raise particular issues in their appeals (Kaplan, Park, & Ridout, 2006; Sides, 2006, 2007; Sigelman & Buell, 2004; Spiliotes & Vavreck, 2002). Rather than studying *whether* campaigns raise economic issues, though, I study *how* they do so. Do campaigns encourage voters to adopt prospective or retrospective time horizons? Do they focus on economic policy positions or policy outcomes? Why do they emphasize certain aspects of economics over others?

I develop a series of hypotheses based on emphasis allocation theory and use a content-coded data set of television ads from the 2004 congressional elections to test them. Overall, the messages that voters are exposed to emphasize policy positions over outcomes, and retrospective time horizons over prospective ones. Beyond these trends, strategy and electoral context drive the types of economic voting campaigns encourage. Candidates promote themselves by emphasizing (unifying) future policy outcomes, and attack their opponents by emphasizing (divisive) past policy positions. In districts experiencing worsening economic conditions, voters are exposed to more information about policy outcomes; in districts where the incumbent is ideologically “out of step,” they hear more about policy positions. Overall, the types of economic considerations voters are asked to think about are strikingly varied, driven by the varying strategic aims and electoral contexts facing campaigns.

Theories of Economic Voting

That citizens use economic issues to guide their vote choices is uncontroversial. Exactly *which* economic considerations matter most is the subject of extensive scholarly debate. In particular, theories of economic voting disagree on the time horizon (retrospective or prospective) and policy focus (policy positions or outcomes) that voters bring to the ballot box.¹

Time Horizons: Voting Prospectively or Retrospectively?

Classic theories of economic voting attribute significantly different time horizons to voters. Downsian models of economic voting portray an electorate focused prospectively on the future gains received from the election of a particular party or candidate. As Downs (1957) states this assumption, each voter “makes his decision by comparing future performances he expects from the competing parties” (p. 39). Expectations about what candidates *will do* in the future if elected are central here. In line with this, numerous studies find that future expectations shape congressional and presidential evaluations (Kuklinski & West, 1981; Lockerbie, 1991; MacKuen et al., 1992; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001; although see also Clarke & Stewart, 1994; Norpoth, 1996).

Models of retrospective voting, in contrast, portray voters as looking to the past, not the future. The critical consideration here is what has happened on the incumbent’s watch (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966). Empirical support for this theory has primarily come from “forecasting” models that explain election outcomes as a result of past economic conditions. One of the earliest, Tufte (1975), modeled the vote share for congressional candidates of the president’s party as a function of the president’s approval ratings and changes in personal income over the previous year. Following Tufte, a slew of models predicted congressional election outcomes relying on past economic conditions, not future expectations (e.g., Abramowitz & Segal, 1986; Newman & Ostrom, 2002).²

The few studies that directly compare these different time horizons conclude that voters tend to utilize both prospective and retrospective evaluations of the economy (Miller & Wattenberg, 1985; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). In part, this may be due to correlations between prospective and retrospective evaluations: voters may use past experiences to guide expectations of the future (Downs, 1957; although see Kuklinski & West, 1981). In short, previous evidence strongly suggests that voters bring a mix of time horizons with them to the ballot box.

Policy Focus: Voting on the Basis of Positions or Outcomes?

The second major divide in theories of economic voting is whether citizens focus on policy positions or policy outcomes. In Stokes’ (1963, p. 373) terminology, citizens may be focused on “position-issues,” “advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives,” or “valence-issues,” those that link the parties “with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (see Clarke et al., 2011, for a recent application of these ideas). These valence issues are, of course, in direct contrast to the policy positions focused on by Downs (1957) and spatial models of candidate positioning that he inspired (although see Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2000, and Groseclose, 2001, for ways in which these two foci may interact). Although later scholars referred to these two considerations in various ways—Miller and Wattenberg (1985) use the terms “policy voting” and “performance voting,” Vavreck (2009) a “policy orientation” and a “results orientation,” Fiorina (1981) “means” and “ends”—the basic distinction is the same. Voters may focus on the positions a candidate takes (e.g., their stance on the minimum wage or on financial regulation), or on the outcomes of government policy (e.g., changes in income or unemployment rates).

Empirical evidence exists for both types of focus. In contrast to Downsian theories of spatial competition that prioritize policy positions above all else, the forecasting models mentioned earlier include only measures of policy outcomes in their models. Their accuracy suggests a potentially limited role for the type of candidate positioning that spatial models emphasize. At the same time, there is strong evidence that voters care about the positions politicians take. Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) show that ideologically

extreme members of Congress face electoral penalties and are more likely to end up out of office. Similarly, survey respondents seem to prioritize the policy positions senators take over valence issues (Jones, 2011). Meanwhile, Lewis-Beck and Nadeau (2011) show that voters factored *both* economic performance and policy positions into their vote choice in the 2008 presidential election.

As before, mixed evidence for the effects of these different policy foci may be due to the correlation between them. Voters may value certain policy positions in part because they believe they are more likely to bring about valued policy outcomes (e.g., supporting tax cuts because they believe it will lead to economic growth). Or voters may see some policy means as ends in and of themselves (Fiorina, 1981, pp. 13–14). Again, while theories of economic voting see a clear distinction between positions and outcomes, voters may make their choices with a mix of policy foci in mind.

Economic Voting Appeals by Campaigns

A wide variety of studies have explored these theories of economic voting through data on individual vote choice and aggregate election returns. This article approaches the debate from a different direction. Rather than asking which economic considerations voters factor into their decisions, I investigate which considerations campaigns try to *persuade* them to use.

While originally dismissed by a “minimal effects” model of campaigns, scholars have begun to study in more detail the issues raised in campaign communications (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008; Geer, 2006; Vavreck, 2001, 2009). Most of this research has focused on *which* issues campaigns choose to discuss. Despite the common perception that candidates raise only issues on which they (or their party) have an advantage, opposing campaigns often converge on similar issue agendas (Kaplan et al., 2006; Sides, 2006, 2007; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). This is particularly true of economic issues, which almost all campaigns raise. This convergence leads some to suggest that *how* campaigns discuss economics, not whether they do so, is the central variable (Sides, 2006).

As suggested by the different theories of economic voting, candidates can present economic issues to voters in multiple ways. Campaigns could ask voters to adopt prospective or retrospective time horizons, and to focus on policy positions or policy outcomes. Take, for example, four ads from 2004, quoted in Table 1 (the data from which these are taken are described shortly).

All four ads raise economic issues, yet discuss them in strikingly different ways. Senators Murray and Bayh both adopt retrospective time horizons, but differ in their policy focus. While Murray’s ad focuses on her past positions on tax policy (ignoring any outcomes that may have resulted), Bayh’s ad is focused on the policy outcomes he has “got done” (better jobs and benefits for Indianans) with no real discussion of the policy means used to do so. As shown in the second column, candidates Thompson and Mongiardo both adopt a prospective time horizon, but different policy foci. Mirroring Murray’s ad on taxes, Thompson details a policy position he will take in the future if elected to the U.S. House; Mongiardo discusses the outcomes he will try to bring about if elected senator. The positions he would support to produce these outcomes are not explained, beyond “get[ting] things done for you,” a striking echo of Bayh’s retrospective ad.

Clearly there are a range of time horizons and policy foci that campaigns can draw on when making economic appeals to voters. What explains why campaigns emphasize different aspects of economics? In the next section, I build on emphasis allocation theory and previous empirical work to identify several testable hypotheses about the strategy behind these economic appeals.

Table 1
Examples of economic appeals made by candidates in 2004 campaign ads, by policy focus and time horizon

		Time horizon	
		Retrospective	Prospective
Policy focus	Positions	<p>Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), “Taxes.” MURRAY: “I have voted, repeatedly, to cut taxes for the middle class. I voted to cut income taxes, cut estate taxes, and cut taxes on married couples, but I did not support the Bush plan that gave the wealthiest 1% half of all the tax cuts.” Coded as focusing on policy positions (+2) and using the past tense (2).</p>	<p>Stan Thompson for U.S. House (R-IA), “Kids’ Competition.” THOMPSON: “My first bill in Congress will provide a \$2,000 a year tax credit for college tuition. I’m Stan Thompson and I approved this message because bold leadership can make a difference.” Coded as focusing on policy positions (+2) and using the future tense (+2).</p>
	Outcomes	<p>Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN), “Protect Soldiers.” ANNOUNCER: “Evan Bayh worked across party lines to win additional funds to build armored vehicles right here in Indiana. Safer troops and more high-paying jobs, with good benefits for Indiana workers. Evan Bayh got it done.” Coded as focusing on policy outcomes (2) and using the past tense (2).</p>	<p>Daniel Mongiardo for U.S. Senate (D-KY), “Commitment.” MONGIARDO: “I’ll fight to make health care more affordable, take on drug companies to reduce the costs of prescription drugs, and work to create jobs here in Kentucky, not overseas. It’s time you had a senator who’ll get things done for you.” Coded as focusing on policy outcomes (2) and using the future tense (+2).</p>

Note. Quotes taken from transcripts captured by CMAG/Wisconsin Advertising Project. Procedure used to code each economic appeal described under “Data.”

Emphasis Allocation Theory and Asking Voters to “Think Economics”

To understand why campaigns appeal to voters in the way they do, I turn to a theory of emphasis allocation most closely associated with Benjamin Page (1976, 1978). In general, the theory seeks to explain which issues campaigns emphasize to voters given their limited resources and limited voter attention. In particular, it highlights two key dimensions along which campaign appeals vary.

First, appeals may be more or less easy for voters to comprehend. Given most voters’ limited political knowledge and interest, campaigns may be advised to emphasize “easily

understood” retrospective judgments of past policy outcomes over complex discussions of future policy positions (Page, 1978, p. 184). Second, appeals may be more or less likely to unify or divide voters. As Page puts it, “a candidate who takes a specific policy stand is bound to alienate those who disagree; but a candidate who promises peace, progress, and prosperity, and projects an image of warmth and honesty, is likely to please almost everyone” (Page, 1978, p. 178). Unlike the divisive nature of policy positions, there is general consensus on the desirability of valence issues (Campbell, 1983; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Stokes, 1963).

Given the electorate’s lack of information and candidates’ need to maximize votes, we might expect campaigns to focus on policy outcomes and the past. Not all appeals, however, are crafted for the same purpose or in the same context. Building directly on research about campaign appeals, I derive several testable hypotheses about how the strategic aim of an appeal, the type of candidate making it, and the electoral context they face may affect the policy focus and time horizons that campaigns emphasize.

Aim of the Appeal

Appeals with different aims—to build support for the sponsor or reduce support for her opponent—are likely to emphasize different aspects of economics. Since valence issues are more unifying than position issues, campaigns should aim to associate themselves (positively) with policy outcomes and their opponent (negatively) with divisive policy positions (Geer, 2006, p. 104; Kaplan et al., 2006). Furthermore, the greater evidence required for negative claims (Geer, 2006) makes discussion of easily documented past policy positions more likely than a discussion of less traceable policy outcomes or future events (Benoit, 2000, p. 289).³ Accordingly, I propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Appeals that attack an opponent will emphasize policy positions and the past more than appeals that advocate for a candidate.

Candidate Status

Numerous studies show that incumbents and challengers follow different campaign communication strategies (e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Vavreck, 2001). Hampered by their relatively unknown status, challengers are more likely to emphasize “unambiguous issue positions that enable voters to evaluate the candidate” (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009, p. 344), in the hopes of drawing attention and support to their candidacy (Kahn & Kenney, 1999, p. 70). Challengers cannot usually distinguish themselves from incumbents on the basis of policy outcomes they have been associated with; instead, the contrasts they draw must center on the policy agenda that they raise. The need to provide this direct contrast should lead challengers to emphasize policy positions to voters:

H2: Challengers’ appeals will emphasize policy positions more than incumbents’ appeals.

Incumbents and challengers are also likely to vary in the time horizons of their appeals. Since incumbents have a record to defend, appeals focusing on them are more likely to emphasize the past than the future (Benoit, 2000). That is, there should be an interaction between candidate status and the aim of their appeal, such that challengers’ attacks and incumbents’ advocacy ads both focus on the past:

H3: Appeals that focus on the incumbent will emphasize the past more than appeals that focus on the challenger.

Election Context

Two features of the election context—the ideological record of the incumbent and the state of the economy—are likely to influence the economic appeals that campaigns choose to make. First, elections differ in terms of the past policy records of the candidates. In particular, incumbents may have accrued a policy voting record that is more or less congruent with their district. The nature of their record is likely to drive the content of candidates' appeals. As Sellers (1998) puts the "simple premise" of congressional campaign strategy, "if the candidate has a record on an issue that reflects the preferences of the state's electorate, then she is likely to offer a positive message on that issue" (p. 163).⁴ The more "out of step" incumbents are, the more challengers will attack on policy positions and the more incumbents should promote themselves on policy outcomes:

H4: The more extreme the incumbent, the more challengers emphasize positions in their negative ads and the more incumbents emphasize policy outcomes in their positive ads.

The second key feature of the election context that is likely to influence the ways that campaigns discuss economics is the state of the economy itself. As Vavreck (2009) argues in the context of presidential elections, whether the economy is doing well or not affects the strategies of incumbents and challengers in asymmetric ways. When the economy is prospering, incumbents should emphasize the positive outcomes in their messaging (and challengers should emphasize policy positions); when the economy is weakening, these strategies should be reversed:

H5: The more positive the economic conditions, the more incumbents emphasize outcomes in their positive ads and the more challengers emphasize positions in their negative ads.

These hypotheses capture a range of reasons campaigns have to emphasize different dimensions of economic voting. The choice to encourage prospective or retrospective voting, to focus voters' attention on valence issues or policy positions, should vary with the aim of the appeal, the type of candidate making it, and the electoral context it airs in. Note that not all of the factors are expected to affect policy foci *and* time horizons. The incumbent's record, for example, should affect appeals' policy focus but not time horizons. Nonetheless, I estimate the effects of all the factors on campaign appeals.

Data

The primary data source is a collection of congressional campaign ads from the 2003–2004 election cycle, captured by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) and coded by the Wisconsin Advertising Project.⁵ CMAG monitors advertising on network and cable television in the 100 largest U.S. media markets. More than 80% of the population resides in these markets, although voters in rural communities are somewhat underrepresented (Franz et al., 2008). Ads from 29 of the 34 states with Senate elections in 2004, and from 169 congressional districts, are included in the data set.

I limit the analyses to general election ads for U.S. House or Senate elections. Ads with an air date before the state's primary or caucus are excluded from the analysis. Ads sponsored by interest groups are likewise excluded, since they likely raise issues in ways that have little to do with candidate strategy. This results in a universe of 396,283 ads broadcast, or 1,524 unique spots. As Prior (2001) shows, the mix of ads that campaigns *produced* is not the same as the mix of messages voters were exposed to: Assuming that an ad that aired once is as important to a candidate's strategy as an ad that aired a thousand times would be a mistake. Throughout the results, the unit of analysis is what Prior terms the "aired ad," the instance of a particular ad being broadcast. This allows the overall flow of communication that voters are (potentially) exposed to, the central concern in this study, to be assessed. As Prior (2001, p. 336) puts it, "[t]he more frequently an ad aired, the more weight it should carry in an analysis when the goal is to answer questions about strategy and effects."

For each ad, CMAG compiles a "storyboard" of screen captures and a transcript. The Wisconsin Advertising Project uses these to code the "theme" of each ad as well as any "issues" that the ad raised.⁶ Each ad could have up to five themes, and up to four issues (a full list of categories of themes and issues is in the codebook, available online at <http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu/>). I use this categorization of themes and issues to identify ads that raised economic matters. If the ad raised any of the following themes (quoted verbatim from the codebook), it was counted as making an economic appeal:

1. "Poverty";
2. "Against (increased) government spending; balancing of the (national) budget; against deficit NOT taxes or tax reform";
3. "RECESSION, DEPRESSION; prosperity of the nation; economic growth; GNP."

Likewise, if an ad raised any of the following issues, it was counted as making an economic appeal:

1. "Taxes";
2. "Deficit/surplus/budget/debt";
3. "Government spending";
4. "Minimum wage";
5. "Farming (e.g., friend of)";
6. "Business (e.g., friend of)";
7. "Employment/jobs";
8. "Poverty";
9. "International trade/globalization/NAFTA";
10. "Union (e.g., friend of)."

During the content coding, I monitored the ads to ensure that noneconomic issues had not been mistakenly included in the universe.⁷

Of the 396,283 aired ads, 203,821 (51.4%) included economic appeals, a proportion similar to that reported by Spiliotes and Vavreck (2002). Also consistent with previous work, candidates did not vary much in their propensity to raise economics. A total of 48.8% of incumbents' ads discussed economics, as did 54.5% of challengers' ads and 52.7% of ads for open seat candidates. Democrats were about as likely to raise economic issues (49.7% of ads) as Republicans (53.0%). In short, there was remarkably little variance in the rate at which economic issues were raised in these campaigns, suggesting that excluding ads that

make no reference to economics does not miss important elements of campaigns' strategies in this regard (see the Supplemental Materials for more details).

Dependent Variables

How campaigns discuss economics, not whether they do so, is the focus of this article. To assess this, I developed a coding scheme based on Miller and Wattenberg's (1985) analysis of open-ended survey responses. Using the CMAG storyboards and transcripts, an undergraduate research assistant coded the policy focus and time horizon used in each ad. The policy focus was coded as a discussion of economic outcomes alone (−2), a mix of positions and outcomes but mostly outcomes (−1), an equal mix of outcomes and positions (0), a mix but mostly positions (+1), or positions alone (+2). The time horizon was coded according to the grammatical tense used in the voice-over, on-screen text, or by to-camera speakers. Ads were categorized as using the past tense (−2), a mix of past and present tense (−1), the present tense (0), a mix of present and future tense (+1), or the future tense (+2). The four examples of ads shown in Table 1 represent appeals at each extreme of these two scales. The policy focus of 83 ads and time horizon of 41 ads was either too ambiguous to code or judged not to be referring to economic issues, and these are excluded from the analyses.⁸

To assess the reliability of this coding scheme, I randomly sampled 100 of the produced ads and independently coded their content on the same two scales. Krippendorff's alpha for the reliability of the policy focus scale was .89, and for the time horizon scale .81. These surpass the threshold of .80 that Krippendorff (2004) recommends, and are higher than those reported in other content analyses of campaign ads (e.g., Jamieson, Waldman, & Sherr, 2000; Kahn & Kenney, 1999, p. 35).

Independent Variables

The hypotheses outlined earlier expect economic appeals to vary by the type of ad, candidate, and election. Accordingly, the independent variables are measured at different levels of aggregation.

At the level of the individual ad, the aim of the appeal is captured by the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Their coders categorized each ad's tone as (1) advocating for the sponsoring candidate, (2) contrasting the candidates, or (3) attacking the sponsoring candidate's opponent. This is coded as a categorical variable, with an "advocacy" ad as the excluded category.

At the level of the ad's sponsor, I code a categorical variable for candidate status. This has values of "Incumbent," "Challenger" (the excluded category), or "Open seat candidate." Previous work has found differences in policy specificity between candidates of different parties (Kahn & Kenney, 1999, 2000). To control for this possibility, I code an indicator variable equaling +1 if the candidate is a Republican, 0 if a Democrat.⁹

At the level of the election (this is the state for Senate races, the district for House races), I replicate the two measures used by Canes-Wrone and colleagues (2002) to assess the ideological fit between the incumbent's record and her district. The incumbent's roll call ideological extremity is based on Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores for the 2003–2004 legislative session. The original scores range from 0 (the most conservative) to 100 (the most liberal), and are mirrored by the incumbent's party affiliation, so higher values indicate a more extreme member. For Democratic incumbents, their extremism score is the same as their ADA score (higher values = more liberal). For Republican

incumbents, their extremism score is calculated as 100–their ADA score (higher values = more conservative). ADA scores are used to replicate exactly the measures used by Canes-Wrone and colleagues (2002); using DW-NOMINATE scores instead produced nearly identical results (as we would expect given their strong correlation). Second, the presidential vote for the incumbent’s party in the district is used as a proxy for the constituency’s ideological leanings. I use the 2000 presidential election: For races with a Democratic incumbent, this is the proportion of the two-party vote that Al Gore received in the state or district; for races with a Republican incumbent, it is the proportion of the vote George W. Bush received. Both variables are recoded to range from 0 to 1, and are centered around their election-level mean.

Measuring economic conditions is less straightforward. The state of the national economy obviously does not vary in a single election year, and sufficient years of data are not available from the Wisconsin Advertising Project to assess with confidence the effect of different economic conditions in the nation as a whole. There is, however, significant variation across states and congressional districts in their economic well-being, and I leverage that fact here. I use two standard indicators of economic conditions, taken from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS). These variables measure the percentage change in household median income from 2003 to 2004, and the percentage change in the unemployment rate in the civilian labor force from 2003 to 2004. Research suggests that such local economic conditions can have strong effects on survey respondents (e.g., Reeves & Gimpel, 2012) and that voters are particularly sensitive to economic change over the prior year (Bartels, 2008). Unfortunately, the ACS does not have data for every congressional district in the study. For House districts which are not represented in the 2003–2004 ACS, I substitute the economic conditions in the state as a whole. The Supplemental Materials include robustness checks that support the claim that this substitution does not affect the results: models that exclude these districts as “missing data” suggest the same results (see Table A-2 in the Supplemental Materials).

The regression models control for the competitiveness of the race, since previous research suggests that candidates in close elections may choose to emphasize different messages (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Kaplan et al., 2006; Sides, 2006). I recode *Congressional Quarterly*’s rating of each election, made in early Fall, such that 0 = Safe for either the Democrat or Republican candidate; 1 = Favored Democrat or Republican; 2 = Likely Democrat or Republican; 3 = Tossup, and center this variable around its election-level mean.¹⁰ I also control for the office being sought, with an indicator for a Senate campaign (as opposed to a House race), to assess whether campaigns for different offices follow different strategies.

Campaign Strategy and Economic Voting Appeals

I begin by examining the overall mix of economic appeals that campaigns make. Discussions of economics tend to focus on policy positions rather than policy outcomes: 43.0% of aired ads concerned positions alone, 19.9% focused mostly on positions, 11.1% focused on both positions and outcomes, 8.4% focused mostly on outcomes, and 17.6% focused on outcomes alone. Collapsing the categories of aired ads that included mention of both positions and outcomes, but were “mostly” focused on one or the other, nearly two-thirds—62.9%—of these appeals emphasized policy means over policy ends. Turning to the distribution of time horizons, campaigns were roughly as likely to focus on the present (37.2% of the ads) or the past (45.0%). What they were extremely *unlikely* to do is encourage prospective voting. Just 6.1% of the aired ads used the future tense to discuss economics

(a further 6.4% used both past and present tense, and 5.3% used both present and future tense). When campaigns raise economic issues, they are much more likely to talk about positions than outcomes, and much more likely to talk about the past than the future.¹¹

To begin testing the hypotheses laid out earlier, I fit regression models predicting the policy focus and time horizon that these appeals used (basic distributions of the dependent variables plotted against the key independent variables can be found in the Supplemental Materials, Figures A-1 and A-2). I use ordered logistic regression models, since the dependent variables are coded as categorical outcomes. As independent variables, I include the aim of the appeal (to test H1), the type of candidate making it (to test H2), and the interaction between them (to test H3). I also control for the party affiliation of the candidate making the appeal, since Democrats and Republicans may present issues in different ways (Kahn & Kenney, 2000). Since each ad can air multiple times (i.e., the unit of analysis is the aired ad), I calculate robust standard errors clustered by the produced ad. Table 2 shows the results. Positive coefficients in the first model indicate a greater focus on positions than outcomes; in the second model, they indicate a more prospective than retrospective time horizon.

The regression coefficients suggest important differences in the economic voting that different campaigns encourage, although the multiple interaction terms make it difficult to

Table 2
Ordinal logistic regression models predicting policy focus and time horizon used to discuss economics in campaign appeals

	Policy focus	Time horizon
<i>Candidate</i>		
Republican	0.30 (0.18) [^]	-0.6 (0.22)**
Incumbent	0.59 (0.44)	-1.13 (0.48)*
Open seat candidate	0.50 (0.44)	-0.07 (0.36)
<i>Aim of appeal</i>		
Contrasts with opponent	1.37 (0.60)*	-1.47 (0.45)***
Attacks opponent	2.00 (0.57)***	-2.48 (0.53)***
Contrasts with opponent × incumbent	-0.38 (0.70)	1.40 (0.67)*
Attacks opponent × incumbent	0.53 (0.76)	1.90 (0.75)**
Contrasts with opponent × open seat	-0.02 (0.68)	0.33 (0.55)
Attacks opponent × open seat	-0.62 (0.65)	1.14 (0.63) [^]
Threshold 1	-0.30 (0.42)	-1.69 (0.32)
Threshold 2	0.24 (0.42)	-1.40 (0.32)
Threshold 3	0.82 (0.42)	0.78 (0.34)
Threshold 4	1.76 (0.43)	1.50 (0.41)
<i>N</i> aired ads	180,513	195,082
Chi-squared for covariates (degrees of freedom)	33145.93*** (9)	27403.79*** (9)

Notes. Robust standard errors, clustered by advertisement. Challenger to an incumbent is excluded category for candidate type; advocacy is the excluded category for aim of appeal. Chi-squared test statistic computed by comparing deviance values in null model (with no covariates) to deviance values in full models shown here.

*** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$. [^] $p < 0.1$.

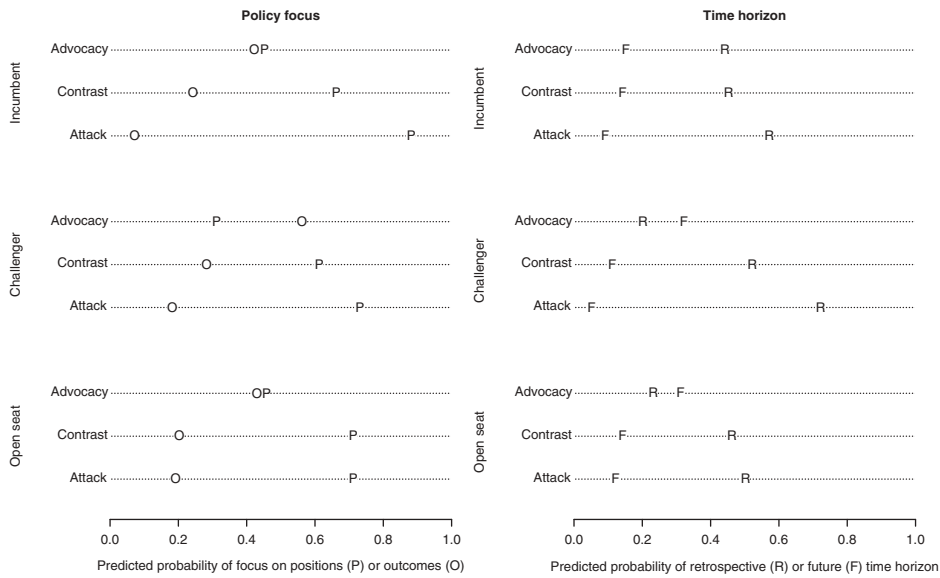


Figure 1. Predicted policy focus and time horizon used to discuss economic issues, by candidate status and aim of appeal. *Note.* Predicted probabilities simulated from models in Table 2.

assess the *substantive* importance of these results. I simulate the results for each type of candidate and each aim of an appeal (the party of the candidate is set to be Republican), as shown in Figure 1. The probability of an aired ad focusing mostly or entirely on positions (P) or outcomes (O) is shown in the left plot; the probability that it adopts mostly or entirely a retrospective (R) or prospective/future (F) time horizon is shown in the right plot. Predicted probabilities for advocacy, contrast, and attack ads sponsored by incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates are shown in turn.

I begin by discussing the left plot, which shows the predicted policy focus of appeals. As H1 expects, ads that advocate for a candidate generally focus more on policy outcomes, while ads that attack an opponent focus more on policy positions. Take the predictions for ads sponsored by incumbents, the top set of estimates. Positive ads from incumbents are predicted to focus essentially equally on positions and outcomes (the probability of focusing solely or mostly on positions is .42; the probability of focusing solely or mostly on outcomes is .45). When attacking their opponents, however, the probability of focusing on policy positions increases to .88—a significant difference of .43 [.17, .64]. This pattern—negative appeals focus more on policy positions than positive appeals do—holds across each type of candidate (challengers’ attack ads have a probability of focusing on positions of .73, compared to .31 for their advocacy ads, a difference of .42 [.17, .56]; open seat attack ads have a probability of focusing on positions of .71, compared to .43 for their advocacy ads, a difference of .28 [.12, .44]). Consistent with the predictions of emphasis allocation theory, candidates are more likely to ask voters to think about policy positions when attacking their opponent than when promoting themselves.

Time horizons also vary with the aim of the appeal, as predicted by H1, although the trend here is somewhat weaker. For challengers and open seat candidates, advocacy ads are more likely to take a prospective time horizon than attack ads (.32 versus .05 for challengers, a difference of .27 [.18, .38]; .31 versus .12 for open seat candidates, a

difference of .20 [.06, .37]). Correspondingly, the probability of adopting a retrospective tone is greater in attack ads than advocacy ads (.52 [.27, .67] greater for challengers, .27 [.11, .44] greater for open seat candidates). This is not the case for incumbents, however, whose ads tend to adopt retrospective time horizons no matter the aim of the appeal. The point estimates suggest that, as for challengers and open seat candidates, the probability of using a retrospective tone is greater in attack than advocacy ads (.57 and .44, a difference of .13 [-.09, .35]). However, as indicated by the confidence intervals that overlap zero, this difference is not statistically significant and I do not place much weight on it here.

In contrast to the support for H1, there is only disconfirming evidence for H2, the hypothesis that challengers discuss policy positions more than incumbents as a way of grabbing voters' attention. If anything, challengers may be *less* likely to emphasize policy positions than incumbents, not more, although the uncertainty around this estimate again precludes any strong conclusions. For example, challengers' advocacy ads are less likely to emphasize policy positions than incumbents' advocacy ads (the difference is .14 [-.04, .31]); their attack ads are also less likely to discuss positions (the difference there is .14 [-.01, .40]). Contrary to expectations that challengers would "shake up" the race by staking out clear policy stances, incumbents are as, or more, likely to discuss positions in their ads.

Ads that promote a candidate are, in general, more likely to focus on future outcomes than past positions. Within that type of ad, there are important differences between types of candidates. H3 predicted that ads about the incumbent are particularly likely to be retrospective, since incumbents have a past record to defend and/or promote. In general, the data support this hypothesis. Incumbents are more likely to focus on the past in their advocacy ads (probability = .44) than challengers are in theirs (probability = .20, a difference of .24 [.02, .47]). Likewise, challengers appear somewhat more likely to attack incumbents with reference to the past (probability = .72) than incumbents are to attack challengers in the same way (probability = .57), although this final difference of .16 [-.09, .42] is not statistically significant. Ads about incumbents (specifically incumbent-sponsored advocacy appeals) are more likely to adopt a retrospective time horizon than ads about challengers are.

In addition to testing these predictions from emphasis allocation theory, the regression results suggest some differences between candidates of different parties. Republican candidates were significantly more likely to focus on the past than Democratic candidates (coefficient = $-.65$, $SE = .22$, $p = .003$), although there was only marginal evidence of significant differences between parties in the extent to which they emphasized positions or outcomes (coefficient = $.30$, $SE = .18$, $p = .10$). Kahn and Kenney (1999, 2000) find a similar effect, and attribute it to the GOP's policies being more popular than the Democrats' in this time period. Testing whether the partisan differences in these data were due to the relative popularity of the parties' positions, which party held a majority in government (e.g., Hibbing & Alford, 1981), or inherent differences in the ways Democrats and Republicans strategize (e.g., Theilmann & Wilhite 1998) would require longitudinal data. Since such data are not available in this study, I leave this for future research, but note that the results here are largely consistent with Kahn and Kenney's (1999) findings.

Overall, congressional campaigns tend to ask voters to think about economics in terms of positions rather than outcomes, and with a retrospective time horizon rather than a prospective one. The exact mix of economic voting appeals presented to voters, however, varies systematically with the campaigns' strategic aim. When aiming to boost their own candidacy, politicians ask voters to think about future economic outcomes; when aiming to hinder their opponent's, they ask voters to think about past policy positions. So far,

however, these conclusions have assumed that those strategies apply across all races. I turn now to exploring how electoral context shapes the ways campaigns ask voters to “think economics.”

Economic Voting Appeals in Context

To assess contextual influences on economic appeals, I estimate multilevel ordered logit models. These are similar to those in [Table 2](#), but allow several parameters to vary across candidates and elections. The candidate-level and election-level variables are then used to predict this variation, allowing us to assess how electoral context influences campaigns’ communication strategies.¹²

The models’ intercepts and the coefficients for the aim of the appeal and their interaction with candidate status vary across candidates and elections, modeled as a function of the incumbent’s policy record (to test H4), presidential vote for the incumbent’s party, and the change in the median income and unemployment rate in the constituency (to test H5). I also model the effect of incumbency as a function of competitiveness of the race, since several scholars suggest that incumbents and challengers vary in their responses to competition ([Druckman et al., 2009](#)). [Table 3](#) presents the results. Since open seat races, by definition, do not have measures of the incumbent’s record, they are excluded here, although exploratory analysis including those races in a model without measures of incumbents’ records did not show any substantive differences in the results.

The estimates for variables measured at the level of the appeal and the candidate essentially mirror those in [Table 2](#), and so I do not discuss them further here. The first contextual result to note is that the election-level variables have no discernible direct effects on the time horizons used in ads. In contests where economic conditions have worsened, or where the incumbent’s record has been out of step, voters are no more or less likely to hear about the past than those in other districts. The time horizons campaigns urge voters to adopt have little to do with the electoral context they face.

In contrast, the policy foci used in ads vary systematically with the context of the election. Take the results for the incumbent’s roll call record, which offer some support for H4, the hypothesis that “out-of-step” incumbents are more likely to face a campaign based on their past policy positions. The policy focus in challengers’ messages does vary with the incumbent’s record: the more ideologically extreme the incumbent, the more likely challengers are to focus on policy positions (the coefficient for the interaction between a challenger attacking and the incumbent’s ideological extremity is 34.34 (12.36), $p = .003$). Following the strategy in [Canes-Wrone and colleagues \(2002, p. 133\)](#), I set the presidential vote to its mean value, and simulate the results of a shift in the incumbent’s roll call extremism score of one standard deviation around the mean. In races with moderate incumbents, challengers’ attack ads tend to focus on outcomes more than positions (probabilities of .64 and .28, respectively). When facing a more extreme incumbent, however, challengers are more likely to focus their attacks on policy positions (probability = .78) than outcomes (.15). A shift in the incumbent’s record from moderate to extreme, relative to their district, increases the probability of attacks focusing on policy positions by .50 [.01, .99]. Extreme incumbents are likely to be assailed about their policy positions. Moderate incumbents, in contrast, are attacked on the basis of outcomes, with little mention of their “in-step” positions.

This strategy is not, however, mirrored in the incumbent’s advertising. The logic of H4 leads us to expect that more extreme incumbents would focus on policy outcomes in their promotional advertising, hoping to draw attention away from their policy positions.

Table 3
Multi-level ordinal logistic regression models predicting policy focus and time horizon used to discuss economics in campaign appeals

	Policy focus	Time horizon
Intercept	-4.56 (1.65)**	1.44 (1.05)
<i>Electoral context</i>		
Senate campaign	-0.10 (1.51)	0.71 (0.93)
Competitiveness of race	1.39 (1.11)	-0.30 (0.73)
Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	-17.93 (8.56)*	-6.27 (6.13)
Presidential vote for incumbent's party	3.73 (20.42)	-1.19 (13.07)
Change in median income	0.18 (0.41)	0.42 (0.26)
Change in unemployment rate	-0.32 (0.10)**	0.02 (0.06)
<i>Candidate</i>		
Republican	2.00 (1.11)^	-1.24 (0.78)
Incumbent	3.54 (1.80)^	-2.53 (1.23)*
× Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	16.94 (10.40)^	0.76 (7.82)
× Presidential vote for incumbent's party	0.23 (22.67)	4.67 (15.61)
× Competitiveness	0.58 (1.30)	-0.44 (0.96)
× Change in median income	0.22 (0.42)	-0.24 (0.32)
× Change in unemployment rate	0.26 (0.12)*	0.00 (0.08)
<i>Aim of appeal</i>		
Contrasts with opponent	8.74 (2.16)**	-3.99 (1.52)**
× Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	5.42 (12.76)	6.59 (9.02)
× Presidential vote for incumbent's party	27.95 (23.44)	-2.11 (16.09)
× Change in median income	0.28 (0.51)	-0.01 (0.40)
× Change in unemployment rate	0.52 (0.16)**	0.00 (0.12)
Attacks opponent	6.05 (3.17) ^	-7.10 (2.26)**
× Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	34.34 (12.36)**	12.13 (10.77)
× Presidential vote for incumbent's party	-26.56 (24.79)	14.23 (18.85)
× Change in median income	-0.08 (0.70)	0.21 (0.52)
× Change in unemployment rate	-0.02 (0.21)	-0.01 (0.15)
Contrasts with opponent × incumbent	-5.00 (3.28)	4.99 (2.59) ^
× Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	12.66 (21.86)	4.21 (16.44)
× Presidential vote for incumbent's party	-42.09 (33.90)	4.46 (27.91)
× Change in median income	-0.96 (0.74)	-0.43 (0.61)
× Change in unemployment rate	-0.62 (0.28)*	-0.08 (0.20)
Attacks opponent × incumbent	2.10 (3.30)	5.61 (2.79)*
× Incumbent's roll call ideological extremity	-33.24 (15.99)*	6.76 (14.99)
× Presidential vote for incumbent's party	57.33 (30.76) ^	-60.55 (26.39)**
× Change in median income	-0.17 (0.77)	-0.41 (0.64)
× Change in unemployment rate	0.18 (0.24)	-0.13 (0.18)

(Continued)

Table 3
(Continued)

	Policy focus	Time horizon
Threshold 1	0.67 (0.01)	0.72 (0.01)
Threshold 2	1.41 (0.01)	5.06 (0.02)
Threshold 3	3.10 (0.01)	6.10 (0.03)
<i>N</i> aired ads	101,671	106,567
<i>N</i> candidates	162	168
<i>N</i> elections	108	112
Chi-squared for covariates (degrees of freedom)	45498.47*** (66)	52157.00*** (66)

Notes. Challenger to an incumbent is excluded category for candidate type; advocacy is the excluded category for aim of appeal. Chi-squared test statistic computed by comparing deviance values in null model (with no covariates) to deviance values in full models shown here.

*** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$. $\wedge p < 0.1$.

The results in Table 3 do not suggest this is the case. The coefficient for the interaction between an incumbent candidate and their extremism is 16.94 (10.40), $p = .10$. Estimating the substantive effects of a shift in incumbent extremism does not suggest any substantial impact of an incumbent's roll call record on their promotional ads. Relatively moderate incumbents have a probability of focusing on policy positions of .14; relatively extreme incumbents a probability of .11. This decreased focus on policy positions is in line with what we would expect to see, but is dwarfed by the confidence intervals (the difference in probability is just .03 [-.44, .32]). While challengers respond to a more extreme incumbent's policy record with an increased focus on policy positions, there is no evidence that incumbents pursue a strategy to try to hide their record from voters.

To assess the effects of local economic conditions on candidate strategies, I estimate the first differences in the probability of focusing on positions or outcomes for ads, given a shift in economic conditions of one standard deviation around zero. For the median income in a constituency, this is comparing an increase of 3.23% to a decrease of 3.23%. For the unemployment rate, this is comparing a decrease of 11.12% to an increase of 11.12%. In both cases, this represents the economy worsening (income decreasing, unemployment increasing), a situation that H5 would expect challengers to respond to by increasing their focus on policy outcomes, incumbents by focusing on positions. Figure 2 presents the change in probability of focusing on policy outcomes that accompanies this change in economic conditions, for incumbents' and challengers' advocacy and attack ads.¹³ The diamonds represent the estimated change in probability, with 90% confidence intervals as brackets around the estimates.

The predicted changes in the probability of focusing on policy outcomes shown in Figure 2 suggest a moderate role for the economy in driving candidate strategies. First, changes in the median income in a constituency have no discernible effect on candidate strategies: the confidence intervals for each estimate overlap zero. The first differences for incumbents suggest that they are less likely to focus on policy outcomes when the median income in their constituency has decreased, although these estimates are not significant (for attack ads, the estimated difference is $-.33$ [-.78, .02]; for advocacy ads, it is $-.03$ [-.17, .00]). Likewise, the first differences for challengers' ads do not suggest any significant responses to changes in the median income in the constituency.

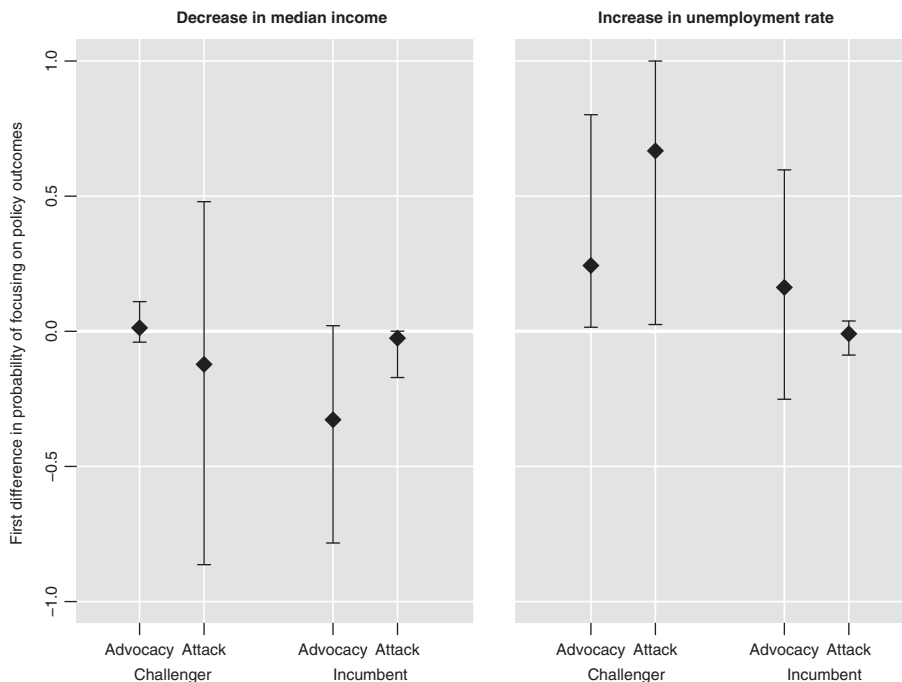


Figure 2. First difference in probability of focusing on policy outcomes, given change in economic conditions. *Note.* First differences in probability of ads focusing mostly or entirely on policy outcomes given change in economic conditions from better to worse. Estimated from ordered logit regression model in first column of Table 3. All other independent variables set to the mean or mode at their level of aggregation.

An increase in the unemployment rate, in contrast, does affect campaign strategy. Consistent with H5, challengers focus more on outcomes in their economic ads when running against incumbents representing districts with increasing unemployment rates. Compared to a constituency where unemployment has *fallen*, challengers in a constituency with increasing unemployment are more likely to focus on policy outcomes in both their positive (a difference in probability of .24 [.01, .80]) and negative (a difference of .67 [.03, 1.00]) advertising. Incumbents, on the other hand, do not appear to change their advertising strategies with changes in the economy. Their focus on policy outcomes remains essentially the same whether their district has seen increases or decreases in unemployment (the differences in probabilities are .16 [-.25, .60] for positive ads; -.01 [-.09, .04] for negative ads). Why incumbents do not respond to the electoral context in the same way as challengers is not clear from these data and beyond the scope of this article. One possibility the literature points to is that, buoyed by name recognition and other advantages of incumbency, they feel less need to alter their strategies to fit local contexts (Druckman et al., 2009).

Overall, these results demonstrate that campaign strategy does not exist in a vacuum: electoral context systematically guides the type of economic voting candidates encourage.¹⁴ The more out of step an incumbent is with her district, the more likely challengers are to discuss economics in terms of policy positions. And the worse economic conditions have been in the district, the more likely the challenger's campaign is to focus on policy

outcomes. In short, whether constituents are encouraged to think about economic policy positions or outcomes depends significantly on the electoral constraints (non-incumbent) candidates face.

Conclusions

Whether legislators are judged on the votes they cast or the outcomes they preside over, on what has happened in the past or on what they promise for the future, has significant implications for democratic accountability and popular control of the economy. Accordingly, a substantial literature has investigated the policy foci and time horizons that voters use. Yet almost no attention has been paid to how candidates themselves discuss economic issues. This study corrects that omission and presents the most detailed evidence to date on how campaigns ask voters to “think economics.”

In his concluding remarks on retrospective voting, Fiorina (1981) offers a synthesis of two of the foundational works on economic voting:

Like Key we should view the mass public as concerned with the ends of government policy more than with the means. . . . But like Downs we should view the voter as looking ahead and choosing between alternative futures. (p. 198)

The appeals campaigns make suggest they have a strikingly different view of the electorate. Rather than focusing on the “ends” of economic outcomes, most ads emphasize the “means” used to achieve them. Rather than “looking ahead” to the future, most are grounded in the past or the present.

Beyond these overall trends, campaign strategy and election context drive the specific mix of economic voting appeals that voters are exposed to. As predicted by emphasis allocation theory, campaigns focus on the more unifying terrain of future policy outcomes when advocating for their own election, and on the more divisive area of past policy positions when attacking their opponent. The electoral environment matters, too. When facing incumbents whose policy record is out of line with their district, challengers are more likely to discuss economics in terms of policy positions. When running in districts which have experienced negative economic conditions over the previous year, challengers are more likely to focus on the valence aspect of policy outcomes in their appeals.

Several features of the research design used here highlight the need for caution in generalizing the results. Although they cover a large number of ads, candidates, and elections, the data are from a single election cycle, 2004. One concern could be that the 2004 campaign agenda was unusually focused on non-economic issues (e.g., terrorism or gay marriage). The data do not indicate this is the case: The proportion of ads raising economics is extremely similar to previous election cycles (see Spiliotes & Vavreck, 2002). Furthermore, it is not clear why a greater salience of non-economic issues would affect *how* campaigns discuss economics (the focus of this study) as opposed to *whether* they raise them in the first place. A more significant limitation from focusing on a single year is that the impact of national factors remains unexplored. In particular, the party in control of Congress and the White House is constant in these data. As a result, it is impossible to assess whether partisan differences in economic appeals are due to differences between parties perceived as “in charge” of the economy or differences between the parties’ approaches to congressional elections more generally. Future studies could replicate the research design used here across multiple years to explore the effects of these factors.

The focus on Congress means that these results cannot speak directly to how candidates for other offices—most obviously, for President—ask voters to think about the economy. We might expect voters to blame or reward presidents for economic outcomes more than members of Congress (and thus that presidential ads would focus more on policy outcomes). Voters, however, view both Congress and the president as responsible for the state of the economy (Rudolph, 2003), and congressional elections appear as sensitive to economic outcomes as presidential elections (Newman & Ostrom, 2002; Tufte, 1975). Previous research, in other words, does not provide much *prima facie* evidence that presidential campaigns make vastly different types of economic appeals to those documented here.

The analysis here relies solely on one mode of communication—television advertisements—whereas modern campaigns generally appeal to voters across a range of media. From a theoretical perspective, candidates have an incentive to strike a consistent message across all media platforms, in order to better communicate their overall campaign theme. And the limited empirical evidence that exists does not suggest candidate messages vary across mediums. Benoit (2000), for example, compares the content of television ads, newspaper ads, direct mail, and Web sites in the 1998 Missouri elections, and concludes that their focus on “past deeds,” “future plans,” and “general goals” was “generally consistent across media” (p. 286).¹⁵ Likewise, Druckman and colleagues (2009, Appendix B) find that candidates who “went negative” on their Web sites were *also* more likely to do so on television and in their comments to news media. Still, it should be noted that the results here are based solely on television ads.

The findings here suggest several additional avenues for further inquiry. Left unexplored in this study is whether voters are responsive to these different appeals—whether the economic messages emphasized by campaigns prime voters to engage in different types of economic voting. Researchers could link the data set used here to survey data including media market residence to explore this possibility (although the survey instruments required may be rare; see Jones [2011]). Also unexplored is whether certain types of economic appeals are more successful in winning votes than others. The data set could be linked to election results (or the divergence from predicted results, as in Vavreck [2009]) to investigate this, although previous work has found little evidence of a causal connection between the emphasis of particular issues by campaigns and their margins of victory (Sides, 2007).

Taking a broader perspective, answers to normative questions about voters’ ability to direct economic policy remain elusive. Survey evidence suggests that voters take both positions and outcomes, past and future, into account when casting their ballots (Jones, 2011; Miller & Wattenberg, 1985; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). These considerations are not necessarily organic or neutral, however. Rather, campaigns attempt to prime certain views of the economy in voters’ minds, just as they try to focus voters’ attention on—or off—the economy more generally (Vavreck, 2009). If campaigns are able to refocus voters’ attention on valence issues over position issues, the mandates they claim do not come with much force. This should not imply that decisions based on policy positions are in some sense “better,” however. Many policy proposals raised by campaigns have no chance of becoming law, or would bring about unwanted consequences. Voting on the basis of policy positions does not necessarily imply greater popular control of the economy. All the same, campaign appeals about policy positions at least offer the appearance of a real electoral choice. Appeals that focus on future policy outcomes offer few reasons for voters to choose one candidate over another. Everyone wants prosperity and peace: Valence appeals on their

own, unlike those based on positions, do little to differentiate the choices available to voters (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2000; Groseclose, 2001).

In this sense, the results also speak to an ongoing debate about the degree of dialogue in American election campaigns. Based on similar data, several studies have found striking levels of agenda convergence between opposing campaigns (Kaplan et al., 2006; Sides, 2006), a necessary although not sufficient criteria for voter learning (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Kaplan and colleagues (2006) note that issue convergence is not the same thing as dialogue: “Both candidates may be talking about the economy, but one may be discussing job growth and the other may be discussing inflation” (p. 735). The results here extend that caveat further: even if both candidates are discussing job growth, one may be discussing his or her position on jobs programs and the other the outcome of unemployment rates. Or one may be discussing inflation over the past four years, the other inflation in the future under his or her leadership. Even if both campaigns encourage economic voting, there may not be any real dialogue between them.

The broader implication of this study concerns the significant variance in the economic messages voters are exposed to. Krause (1997) argues that “studies of economic opinion formation can draw misleading conclusions when treating the electorate as a singular entity” (p. 1196), since voters differ in how they arrive at their evaluations of the economy. In the same way, studies that seek to evaluate competing theories of economic voting may draw misleading conclusions if they treat the information environment as a homogeneous constant. Campaigns in different districts, facing different strategic incentives, emphasize different types of economic voting. When scholars “think elections,” they should think beyond just “economics” and take into account the heterogeneous perspectives on the economy that campaigns encourage voters to take.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher’s Web site at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.915158>.

Notes

1. Scholars also disagree on whether voters prioritize “pocketbook” (their own economic situation) or “sociotropic” (the nation’s economy) considerations (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981). The distinction is largely subsumed within these larger debates, since both pocketbook and sociotropic theories assume that voters focus on *past* policy outcomes.

2. To be clear, neither prospective nor retrospective theories focus solely on economics. Downs specifies that voters may gain utility from any kind of policy; both Key (1966) and Fiorina (1981) explore retrospective evaluations of foreign policy in addition to the economy. Nonetheless, they focus mostly on economics, as does the literature that followed (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000).

3. There is little consensus about what makes a negative appeal “negative.” Here I am defining an appeal in terms of who it is about: whether it *advocates* for the sponsor, *attacks* her opponent, or *contrasts* the two (Jamieson et al., 2000).

4. This effect is not necessarily limited to incumbents. Given the limitations in accurately assessing the positions of non-incumbents, and the centrality of the incumbent to voters' decisions in congressional elections, I focus just on their positions here. Future work could extend this by estimating challengers' records and assessing their strategies in turn.

5. Use of the data requires the following disclaimer: "The data was obtained from a project of the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project includes media tracking data from TNSMI/Campaign Media Analysis Group in Washington, DC. The University of Wisconsin Advertising Project was sponsored by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project or The Pew Charitable Trusts."

6. The difference between "themes" and "issues" is not specified in the codebook. Limiting the analysis to ads that raised an economic issue but not a theme does not change the results. For convenience, I refer to economic "issues" when discussing both the issues and themes that the Wisconsin project coded.

7. Of concern was the "Farming" category, which could conceivably cover a range of non-economic issues. In these data there are only three ads coded as discussing "Farming" but no other economic issue. Closer examination showed that these ads used agricultural issues as a jumping-off point for broader economic discussions. For example, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) spoke directly on camera at a local farm that had "Purple and gold sweet potatoes by the thousands. Modern farm equipment. A growing family business. And a local economy that's getting healthier every day" ("Field").

8. I also explored disaggregating the data into each mention of an issue in an ad. There is no evidence that using the mention of an economic issue (rather than using the ad itself) as unit of analysis changes the results. This is because the vast majority—98.2%—of the ads last 30 seconds or less and few deal with multiple issues in distinct ways.

9. No ads from third-party candidates appear in the universe. Then-Representative Bernie Sanders (I-VT) caucused with the Democrats in Congress and is coded as such.

10. I do not include any other measures of campaigning—for example, fundraising or challenger quality—here. While there is extensive evidence that these factors affect other *outcomes*, such as likelihood of winning or media attention (Kahn & Kenney, 1999) there is no theoretical reason that they should affect the *content* of ads.

11. There is a weak correlation between time horizons and policy foci of .20, indicating that retrospective ads focused somewhat more on policy positions. I fit separate models for each dependent variable in the analyses that follow.

12. Note that the population exposed to each ad and the population of constituents may differ due to the fact that district and media market boundaries are not identical. Here I am assuming that campaigns frame their messages on the basis of their constituents' characteristics, even if voters outside of their constituency are also exposed to the ad.

13. To allow for easier comparisons, I present only the changes in the probability of focusing on policy outcomes here. The corresponding probabilities of focusing on policy positions lead to the same interpretation as here. I do not show the estimated first differences for contrast ads here, which do not reach standard levels of significance. These are available in the Supplemental Materials, Table A-3.

14. Two contextual factors that do *not* appear to affect the presentation of economic issues are electoral competition and the type of office being sought. This latter null finding complements earlier work that suggests campaigns for different legislative offices follow a common strategic logic (Sellers, 1998).

15. The one exception is Web sites, which frequently consisted of little more than a CV. Given the data in this early study are from 1998, one hesitates to generalize from this to say that modern e-campaigning adopts a different focus from television ads.

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