



Partisanship, Political Awareness, and Retrospective Evaluations, 1956–2016

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Abstract

A long line of research shows that voters frequently evaluate objective conditions through a perceptual screen, seeing a stronger economy and more peaceful world when their party is in power. We know less about how and why these partisan perceptual differences have changed over recent history, however. This paper combines ANES measures of retrospective evaluations from 1956 to 2016 and shows that partisan differences (1) have increased significantly over the past few decades across all types of assessments; (2) are greatest, and have changed the most, amongst the most politically aware; and (3) closely track changes in elite polarization over this time period. The extent of partisan disagreement in retrospective evaluations is thus not constant, but rather contingent on attributes of the voter and the political context. Greater political awareness and more polarized politicians result in larger partisan perceptual differences, as the most engaged citizens are the most likely to receive and internalize cues about the state of the world from their party's elites.

Keywords Retrospective evaluations · Partisanship · Political awareness

Theories of retrospective voting posit a simple relationship between the government's record in office and their re-election chances: voters assess whether the economy and foreign affairs have gotten better or worse, and reward or punish incumbents accordingly (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). A long line of research suggests that voters' retrospective evaluations are not so straightforwardly derived from objective conditions, however. At least since *The American Voter's* analysis of elections in the 1950s, numerous studies find that voters view changes in economic and foreign

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affairs through a “perceptual screen” shaded by partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960). Those who identify with the incumbent party tend to see the economy as improving and the world becoming more peaceful than those who identify with the opposition, leading to sizable partisan perceptual differences in retrospective evaluations (e.g., Bartels 2002; Wlezien et al. 1997; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Conover et al. 1987; Schaffner and Roche 2017).¹

While we might expect greater political awareness to reduce such partisan differences—since more engaged citizens are presumably more exposed to information about the actual state of the world—the opposite is true. Politically attentive voters are *more* likely to see the world in ways that support their party than their less aware counterparts (Duch et al. 2000; Zaller 2004), because they are more likely to internalize messaging from their party’s elites, are more motivated to defend their predispositions, and possess greater cognitive skills to counter-argue against disagreeable information (Zaller 1992; Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber et al. 2009; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2014).

Although there is ample evidence that partisanship colors retrospective evaluations, particularly among the most politically aware, we know less about how the magnitude of partisan perceptual differences has changed in the decades since *The American Voter*’s original studies. In this article, I draw on 60 years of survey items from the American National Election Studies’ (ANES) Time Series to document the changing relationship between partisanship, political awareness, and retrospective evaluations. In brief, I ask: how and why has the size of partisan perceptual differences in voters’ retrospective evaluations changed since the 1950s? Three main findings emerge.

First, after declining in the 1960s and 1970s, the magnitude of partisan perceptual differences has increased substantially in recent years. This is the case across various types of retrospective evaluations—pocketbook assessments of one’s own financial situation, sociotropic evaluations of the country’s economy, and judgments of foreign affairs. Partisans are now more likely to disagree about the state of the world than they were in the past, although this trend has not always been a straightforwardly linear one.

Second, these partisan perceptual differences are greatest, and have changed the most over time, for highly aware voters. Among the least engaged, there were few differences between in- and out-partisans’ perceptions of the world in the 1950s—and there remain few differences today. Among the most politically aware, in contrast, there are significant partisan differences, and these have changed substantially in magnitude over the post-war period.

Finally, the growth in partisan perceptual differences reflects changes in the political context, particularly increasing elite polarization. As party leaders have adopted more extreme positions, voters have reported more divergent perceptions

¹ I follow previous research (e.g., Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018) and use “partisan perceptual differences” to refer to differences between in- and out-partisans’ retrospective evaluations. Unlike the term “partisan bias”, it is purely descriptive, and agnostic on the exact mechanism producing such differences (see Gerber and Huber (2010) for more).

of the world. In contrast, there is no evidence that objective economic conditions place limits on the size of partisan perceptual differences. Partisans' evaluations do not converge in the face of an unambiguously strong (or weak) economy. Rather, the messages sent by elites appear to drive the size of perceptual disagreement in the mass public.

Overall, the results lend support to the argument that the “culprits” to blame for partisan perceptual differences are party elites and the polarized cues they send (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Weinschenk 2012). As elites have become increasingly polarized over the post-war period, the most aware voters—who are most likely to receive and internalize messages from their party's politicians—have increasingly reported perceptions of the world that align with their partisanship. More broadly, this suggests that disagreement between partisans about objective conditions is not an inevitable constant but instead is contingent on voters' political awareness and the cues sent by elites.

Partisanship, Political Awareness, and Retrospective Evaluations

That the average voter is less politically aware than lofty theories of democracy might expect is the starting point for both theories of retrospective voting and partisanship. For retrospective voting, citizens' lack of political information means they are more likely to rely on simple heuristics like the state of the economy when assessing incumbent parties. As Fiorina (1981) put it, while the average voter might not “spend his life watching “Meet the Press” and reading the *New York Times*” (p. 10), they did “know what life has been like during the incumbent's administration” (p. 5). And even largely uninformed citizens should be able to figure out that “[if] jobs have been lost in a recession, something is wrong” (p. 5) and vote the incumbents out.

For theories of voting rooted in partisanship, however, citizens' lack of information meant they were more likely to rely on a different heuristic: the party of the incumbent. In the original Michigan formulation, party served “as a supplier of cues by which the individual may evaluate the elements of politics”, giving the citizen “sources of information from which he may learn indirectly what he cannot know as a matter of direct experience” (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 128). Relying on such cues for information, however, led opposing partisans to divergent perceptions of the world outside their heads: party identification “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (p. 133). Thus, Democrats in the 1950s perceived President Eisenhower, his record in office, and the state of the country, more negatively than did his fellow Republicans (Campbell et al. 1960, pp. 128–130).

Evidence of these partisan perceptual differences has been well-documented in the decades since *The American Voter*. The perceptual screen of partisanship colors factual beliefs about economic and military conditions (Bartels 2002; Evans and Pickup 2010; Conover et al. 1987; Lavine et al. 2012); how those facts are interpreted (Gaines et al. 2007; Bisgaard 2015); and how responsibility for them is attributed (Rudolph 2003; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Healy et al. 2014). More generally,

substantial evidence suggests that voters are motivated reasoners who process information in ways that protect their partisan identities. Partisans seek out information congenial to their party and counter-argue information that supports the opposition (Taber and Lodge 2006; Redlawsk 2002). As such, Democrats and Republicans frequently reach different conclusions about whether the economy is getting better or worse, the world more or less peaceful, based on which party is in power.

Not all voters are equally likely to behave in this manner, however. Although we might expect political awareness to ameliorate partisan differences—since more engaged citizens should be more likely to receive information about the true state of affairs—motivated reasoning is greatest among those who pay the most attention to politics (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber et al. 2009).² “Being a motivated reasoner takes effort” and so is most likely to occur amongst those with higher levels of political awareness, since they “possess greater ammunition with which to counterargue incongruent facts, figures, and arguments” (Taber and Lodge 2006, p. 757).

Previous research suggests that political awareness increases partisan perceptual differences in retrospective evaluations. Reporting on the 1992 ANES, Duch et al. (2000) find a significant interaction effect between party and awareness in predicting retrospective evaluations of the nation’s economy. The least aware Democrats and Republicans did not differ significantly in their assessments. Among the most aware, party strongly predicted evaluations, with Republicans more likely than Democrats to believe the economy had grown under Republican President Bush. Similarly, perceptions of the size of the budget deficit (Achen and Bartels 2016, Chap. 10); ballot propositions regarding workplace regulations (Wells et al. 2009); economic performance (Zaller 2004); and the antecedents of the Iraq war (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2014) increasingly align with respondents’ predispositions the greater their political awareness. In short, more politically aware voters are more likely to perceive the world in ways that support their partisan identities.

Although the “prevailing wisdom” might be that “the culprit [behind these partisan differences] is individual-level motivation” (Jerit and Barabas 2012, p. 673), scholars suggest the political and economic context also affects the extent of motivated reasoning. In terms of political context, the rhetoric used by elites can provide partisans with cues about how to evaluate the state of the world. More strident elite disagreement increases the likelihood that voters follow their party’s messaging (Druckman et al. 2013; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). The extent of partisan perceptual differences could thus be linked to increasing elite polarization. For example, Weinschenk (2012) shows that partisanship has a stronger effect on voters’ perceptions of their own personal finances the more that politicians stake out polarized ideological positions (see also Zaller 1992, pp. 163–5; Enns and McAvoy 2012; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). This relationship between elite polarization and

² I use the term “political awareness” in the sense of Zaller (1992): “the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered...Political awareness denotes intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs” (p. 21, italics in original). As Zaller notes, this is sometimes labelled sophistication, engagement, attention, and so on. Here, I understand these terms to essentially be synonymous.

partisan perceptual differences should be *particularly* strong among the most politically aware, since they are more likely to receive and accept cues from elites in the first place (Zaller 1992; Wells et al. 2009).

At the same time as greater polarization may increase partisan perceptual differences, objective economic conditions may limit opportunities for such motivated reasoning. Seeking out congenial information (and avoiding unwelcome news) is an easier task when economic conditions are average or mixed. When the country experiences great prosperity or deep recession, partisans struggle to reason in a motivated manner and must face up to the facts (Parker-Stephen 2013). Thus, Chzheng et al. (2014) find greater partisan perceptual differences among British respondents during times of average economic performance (1997–2001) than during the economic turmoil of 2005–2010. In the American context, Parker-Stephen (2013) similarly documents reductions in partisan perceptual differences when economic indicators unambiguously point in one direction (see also Healy and Malhotra 2013, p. 293; Enns and McAvoy 2012). As such, we would expect partisan perceptual differences to diminish in the face of extreme economic news, whether it is good or bad.³

Taken collectively, these studies lead us to expect stark differences between partisans in their retrospective evaluations. These differences should be greatest among the most politically aware, who are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning and are more likely to be exposed to partisan messaging from political elites. Further, the existing literature suggests that contextual factors beyond these individual attributes should affect the magnitude of partisan perceptual differences. While greater polarization among elites should increase these differences (as voters follow the more extreme cues sent by party leaders), more extreme economic conditions should decrease them (as the objective state of the economy limits opportunities to engage in motivated reasoning). In this paper, I assess these theoretical expectations and show how the relationships between partisanship, political awareness, and retrospective evaluations have changed since the 1950s. I begin by describing the data and methods used to do so.

Data and Methods

The primary data for this project are the biennial ANES Times Series Studies, which interview a representative cross-sectional sample of American adults. Altogether, there are 27 studies spanning the years 1956–2016, with a total of 54,734 respondents.⁴ The survey data are weighted according to ANES-provided weights.

³ A related question is how economic conditions influence voters' assessments of the economy. Lewis-Beck et al. (2013), using similar data to this study, find that as the economy grows, evaluations become more positive. My interest here is in a different question, how economic conditions influence the magnitude of partisan differences in perceptions of the economy. I return to this distinction in the conclusion.

⁴ The ANES did not run a Time Series study in the midterm years of 2006, 2010, or 2014. Questions about retrospective evaluations first appear in the 1956 survey, and so I do not use the 1948 or 1952 studies.

Retrospective Evaluations

Based on retrospective voting theory, I identified items from each study that assessed perceptions of change in objective conditions over the recent past—for example, whether the nation’s economy had gotten better or worse in the preceding year. This resulted in eleven survey items asked a total of 103 times in repeated years.⁵ In keeping with the literature (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Markus 1988), I distinguish between three types of evaluations: (1) **Pocketbook economic evaluations** of how the respondent’s own financial well-being had changed, including assessments of changes in their income, ability to keep up with the cost of living, and general financial status; (2) **Sociotropic economic evaluations** of how the nation’s economy had changed, including assessments of changes in the state of the economy, unemployment, business conditions, and inflation; and (3) **Foreign affairs evaluations** that assess changes in the country’s position in the world, chances of staying out of war, and dealings with foreign countries. One additional item asking for evaluations of how “things in the country are generally going” appears on five surveys. While clearly asking for a retrospective evaluation, it does not fit neatly into any of these sub-categories. I include this item in the analysis of “all” evaluations, but exclude it when breaking down the data by type of evaluation.

Positive responses to each item (indicating that conditions had gotten better) were coded as + 1; negative responses (that conditions had gotten worse) as – 1. Responses indicating that conditions had stayed the same were coded as 0. I treat these as ordered categorical data to maintain the nature of the response options given to respondents.⁶

Individual-Level Independent Variables

As in previous research, partisanship is coded as a categorical variable, with those who identify as the same party as the sitting president considered **in-partisans**, those who identify with the opposing party **out-partisans**. Party affiliations include Independent leaners, leaving only “pure” **Independents** as the final category. In the regression models, in-partisans are treated as the reference group.

As control variables, I include several demographic characteristics of the respondent which were asked in each of the ANES studies. **Age** is measured in decades (i.e., divided by ten) to simplify the presentation of coefficients. **Income** codes annual family income into five categories: 0–16th percentile; 17th–33rd percentile; 34th–67th percentile; 68th–95th percentile; and 96th–100th percentile. **Education** ranges from 1 (respondent completed eight grades of school or less) to 7 (respondent

⁵ Question wording and details about which year each item was asked in are included in Table A1 in the online appendix.

⁶ In some but not all years, the ANES followed up with questions about *how much* better or worse conditions had become. In order to maintain comparability across survey years, the results shown here do not utilize this follow-up question. Preliminary analysis using the full responses on five-point scales reached the same substantive conclusions as here.

had an advanced degree).⁷ **Female** is an indicator variable for women, while **White** is an indicator for non-Hispanic White respondents.⁸

Measuring **political awareness** is less straightforward. The ANES has not consistently asked the same items over its 60 year history. I follow previous work (e.g., Zaller 1992) and construct an index that averages several items capturing respondents' interest in and knowledge of politics. The index incorporates: how often the respondent reports following "what's going on in government and public affairs"; how interested they say they are in that year's election campaigns; the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's information about politics in both waves of the survey; and the respondent's factual knowledge about which party controlled each chamber of Congress before and after the election. Each item is rescaled to range from 0 to + 1, and a simple mean taken.

Although not ideal (since different items are included in different years), evidence presented in Section A4 of the online appendix suggests that these items comprise a reliable and comparable index across the time series. Cronbach's alpha is 0.79 in the full dataset, indicating substantial reliability. This has not varied systematically over time either: the correlation between year of survey and alpha statistic for its awareness items is just 0.07. A supplementary principal components analysis finds that a single dimension accounts for the majority of the variance in these items. Each item is strongly correlated with this principal component and makes a roughly equal contribution to it, which supports the approach of taking a simple average used here. Finally, replicating the analyses using (a) the coordinates derived from the principal components analysis, and (b) a single awareness item that was asked in all but 1 year, leads to the same substantive conclusions (see Section A4 of the online appendix for full details). While this index is not the perfect measure of political awareness, these rarely exist in consistent forms across multiple surveys and so I make use of it in what follows.

Year-Level Independent Variables

Several variables are measured at the level of the survey year. **Elite polarization** is measured using first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores for the parties' average members in Congress, taken from Lewis et al. (2018). For each year, I subtract the position of the median Democrat in the House of Representatives from the position of the median Republican in the House. I do the same for the parties' median members in the Senate, and then take the mean of these two scores. The score ranges from 0.53 to 0.84 across the years, and is centered around its (year-level) mean of

⁷ The measures of income and education are treated as continuous variables ranging from 1–5 to 1–7 respectively. This assumes that the numerical distances between each category code represent equal increases in each underlying variable. This is a strong assumption; since these variables are used as controls here I adopt this approach for simplicity.

⁸ ANES measurement of race and ethnicity has changed significantly over the years. As such, I rely on the White indicator with all other races/ethnicities as the omitted category. This is obviously not ideal, and sacrifices a more accurate measure of respondents' racial/ethnic identities in favor of comparability across years.

0.64 to ease interpretation of the multi-level regression coefficients. Higher values indicate that the average Democrat and average Republican in Congress were further apart ideologically—and thus that there was greater polarization among elites.

As a measure of economic conditions in each year, I follow previous work (Lewis-Beck et al. 2013; Lavine et al. 2012) and include the **change in GDP** in the first three quarters of each election year.⁹ This ranges from −1.92 to 6.71 in these years, and is centered around its mean of 2.78. The models include this economic indicator as a first- and second-order term, to capture the expectation from previous work that more extreme economic conditions (whether good *or* bad) reduce the ability of partisans to engage in motivated reasoning (Parker-Stephen 2013).¹⁰ Including the second-order term in this way also captures the effect that particularly extreme deviations from normal economic conditions have, since larger economic changes are magnified.

Although the partisan status of each respondent is calculated with reference to the president, control of Congress may also affect retrospective evaluations. Under divided government, responsibility for current conditions may be murkier (e.g., Rudolph 2003) and voters may feel less pressure to defend their party's reputation. I include an indicator variable for **unified government** to capture this expectation. Finally, since presidential campaigns may heighten attention to performance issues (Lenz 2012), I include an indicator for surveys conducted during a **presidential election year**.

Analytical Strategy: Perceptions of the Economy in 1980 and 2016

To estimate the size of partisan perceptual differences, I fit a separate ordered logistic regression model for each retrospective evaluation in each year and then simulate the results. As an example of this analytical strategy, Table 1 presents two of the models, predicting retrospective evaluations of the state of the U.S. economy in 1980 (the first year the item was asked) and in 2016.

The coefficients do not provide an easy way of assessing the main quantity of interest in this study, the difference between in- and out-partisans' perceptions. To estimate that, I begin by simulating the probability that each type of partisan gave each of the responses. Other independent variables are held at their average values in the full dataset: for age, this is the mean, 4.52; for white and female their modal values of 1; and the median value of 3 for both education and income. These predicted probabilities are shown in the upper section of Table 2. For example, in 1980

⁹ This timeframe was chosen for three reasons. First, the survey questions almost all ask for assessments of change over the prior year (see Table A1 in the online appendix). Second, previous studies use this measure (e.g., Lewis-Beck et al. 2013; Lavine et al. 2012), allowing for more comparability with the findings here. Finally, research suggests voters weigh the preceding year most heavily in their assessments (Healy and Lenz 2013).

¹⁰ Alternative measures of economic conditions used by Lewis-Beck et al. (2013)—the change in the Consumer Price Index, the value of the S&P 500 index, and the unemployment rate—produced substantively similar results as those reported here. Since Lewis-Beck et al. (2013, p. 526) report that change in GDP has the most robust effects on perceptions of the economy, I present those estimates here.

Table 1 Ordered logistic regression models predicting retrospective evaluations of U.S. economy, 1980 and 2016

	1980	2016
Age	0.03 (0.04)	– 0.03 (0.02)
White	– 0.24 (0.21)	– 0.34 (0.10)***
Income	– 0.15 (0.07)*	0.14 (0.04)***
Education	– 0.02 (0.05)	0.14 (0.03)***
Female	– 0.17 (0.15)	– 0.31 (0.08)***
Independent	– 0.29 (0.22)	– 1.30 (0.13)***
Out-partisan	– 0.85 (0.19)***	– 1.70 (0.10)***
Threshold 1	0.67 (0.37) [†]	– 1.37 (0.21)***
Threshold 2	2.34 (0.38)***	0.77 (0.21)***
N respondents	1387	3409

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [†] $p < 0.1$

the probability that an in-partisan said the economy had gotten better was 0.04 [95% confidence intervals = 0.01, 0.10]; the probability of an out-partisan saying it had gotten better was 0.02 [0.00, 0.05]. In 2016, those probabilities were 0.33 [0.18, 0.49] and 0.08 [0.04, 0.15] respectively.

Rather than presenting all nine probabilities for each model, I calculate the first difference in the probability of in- and out-partisans saying conditions had gotten better. As shown in the final row of Table 2, in 1980 in-partisans had a 0.02 [0.00, 0.06] greater probability of saying the economy had improved than out-partisans (this can be seen by subtracting 0.02 from 0.04 in the predicted probabilities). In 2016, in-partisans had a 0.25 [0.14, 0.34] greater probability (again, this can be seen by subtracting 0.08 from 0.33). I use this first difference as the key measure of partisan perceptual differences throughout the article. Higher positive values, indicating that in-partisans were more likely to perceive conditions as having gotten better than out-partisans, are interpreted as greater perceptual differences.

This first difference is not the only way of estimating partisan perceptual differences from these models, although it is a concise one. First differences in the probability of saying that conditions had gotten *worse* rather than better could also be calculated, as they are in the final row of Table 2. Or the basic probabilities for each type of partisan giving each type of response could be shown, as in the upper portion of Table 2.¹¹ Section A3 of the online appendix replicates the main results from the paper in each of these ways. Examining partisan differences in negative perceptions leads to largely the same conclusions as presented here (foreign policy attitudes may be the exception, as I note shortly). Plotting all predicted probabilities provides more information about how each type of partisan evaluated conditions.

¹¹ First differences between partisans and Independents could also be calculated, although the focus of this paper is on differences between identifiers of different parties. I leave it to future work to explore how Independents construct retrospective evaluations, but note that the analysis in the online appendix suggests Independents' responses frequently resemble those of out-partisans.

Table 2 Predicted probabilities of evaluations of U.S. economy by party, 1980 and 2016

	1980			2016		
	Probability of saying economy had...			Probability of saying economy had...		
	Gotten better	Stayed same	Gotten worse	Gotten better	Stayed same	Gotten worse
In-partisan	0.04 [0.01, 0.10]	0.14 [0.08, 0.20]	0.82 [0.77, 0.85]	0.33 [0.18, 0.49]	0.48 [0.33, 0.61]	0.19 [0.17, 0.22]
Out-partisan	0.02 [0.00, 0.05]	0.07 [0.04, 0.10]	0.91 [0.88, 0.94]	0.08 [0.04, 0.15]	0.35 [0.29, 0.39]	0.57 [0.53, 0.61]
Independent	0.03 [0.00, 0.07]	0.12 [0.06, 0.18]	0.85 [0.80, 0.90]	0.12 [0.06, 0.19]	0.41 [0.33, 0.48]	0.47 [0.42, 0.52]
First difference between in- and out-partisans	0.02 [0.00, 0.06]	0.07 [0.03, 0.11]	- 0.10 [- 0.14, - 0.06]	0.25 [0.14, 0.34]	0.13 [0.03, 0.24]	- 0.38 [- 0.41, - 0.34]

Probability of giving each response, and first difference in probabilities between in- and out-partisans, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Simulated from models in Table 1. All other independent variables held at their average values: age at 4.52, white and female at 1, and education and income at 3

However, it is harder to evaluate how much in- and out-partisans disagree about the state of the world, which is the key quantity of interest here. I therefore use the first differences in probability of saying that conditions had improved as my measure of partisan perceptual differences, but note that these alternative estimates are available in the online appendix for the interested reader.

Partisan Perceptual Differences, 1956–2016

Figure 1 plots the first difference in the probability that in- and out-partisans said conditions had gotten better, for each retrospective evaluation in each year (full model results can be found in Tables A2–A12 in the online appendix). A superimposed loess line shows the local weighted average of these first differences with a 95% confidence interval for that average.¹² The first differences shown in the plots are jittered slightly along the *x*-axis to improve visibility; the loess lines and discussion of the results below are based on the actual year values.

Several patterns stand out from Fig. 1. First, over time the magnitude of partisan perceptual differences has increased—but the trend is not a straightforwardly linear one. When grouping all evaluations together, as in plot (a), perceptual differences are clearly greater in the present time period than in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, for example, in-partisans had an average 0.05 [0.02, 0.09] greater probability of offering a positive retrospective evaluation than out-partisans. In 2016, that had increased significantly to 0.21 [0.14, 0.28]. The late 1960s and early 1970s emerge as the most muted period of partisanship in this analysis, with the late 1950s and early 1960s a time of relatively large perceptual differences between partisans. On average, in-partisans in 1956 had a 0.19 [0.12, 0.25] greater probability of offering a positive evaluation—a *larger* difference than in 1970 and more comparable to the most recent year. The view of the 1950s and 1960s as an era of low polarization may be misplaced, at least when looking at the mass public. The period that stands out as unusual is *not* necessarily our own time period or the 1950s, but rather the 1970s, when perceptual differences between partisans were frequently minor or non-existent.

Second, there are important differences across types of evaluations in the degree to which partisans' perceptions diverge. Partisan differences are greater in perceptions of sociotropic economic conditions (where the average first difference across the years is 0.12) and foreign affairs (an average of 0.15) than in perceptions of pocketbook economic conditions (an average of 0.08). This is consistent with the idea that evaluations of national issues should be more influenced by partisanship than evaluations of one's own personal situation, since the former provide more opportunity for motivated reasoners to find evidence for their claims (e.g., Weinschenk 2012).

¹² The local weighted regression uses a span of 0.75, meaning that the nearest 3/4 of the data points are used to calculate the average for each year, with greater weight given to closer data points. See Cleveland et al. (1991).

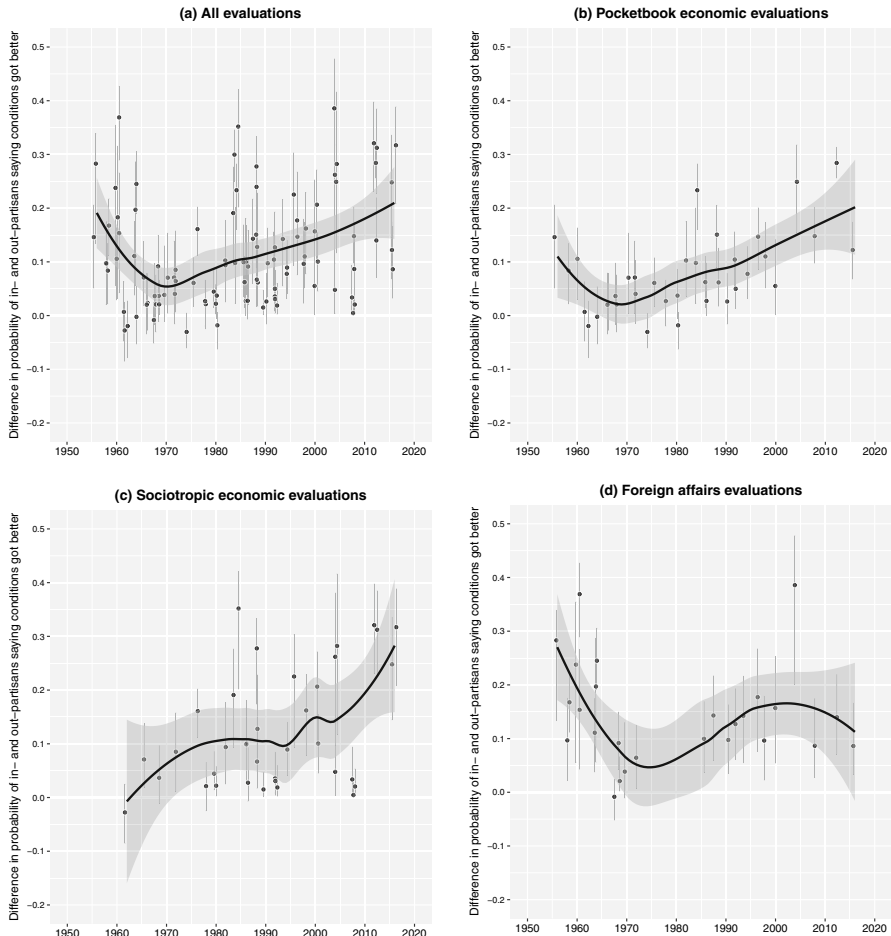


Fig. 1 Partisan perceptual differences, 1956–2016. *Note:* First differences in the probability of saying conditions had “gotten better” between in- and out-partisans with 95% confidence intervals, simulated from ordered logistic regression models shown in online appendix. Other independent variables are held at their average values. Superimposed loess lines show local weighted average of the first differences, with 95% confidence intervals. Values on horizontal axis have been jittered slightly to distinguish estimates

Although partisan perceptual differences clearly increased over time for evaluations of economic conditions, at first glance the data suggest that differences in perceptions of foreign affairs may have actually *decreased* in recent years. The average difference was 0.27 [0.18, 0.36] in 1956 but 0.11 [−0.01, 0.23] in 2016. In part, this could be an artifact of the data: there are fewer foreign affairs questions asked in the time series and so potential outliers carry greater weight. Examining differences in the probability of perceiving conditions as having gotten *worse*, as in Figure A1 in the online appendix, shows that foreign affairs evaluations follow a trend highly similar to domestic evaluations. The difference

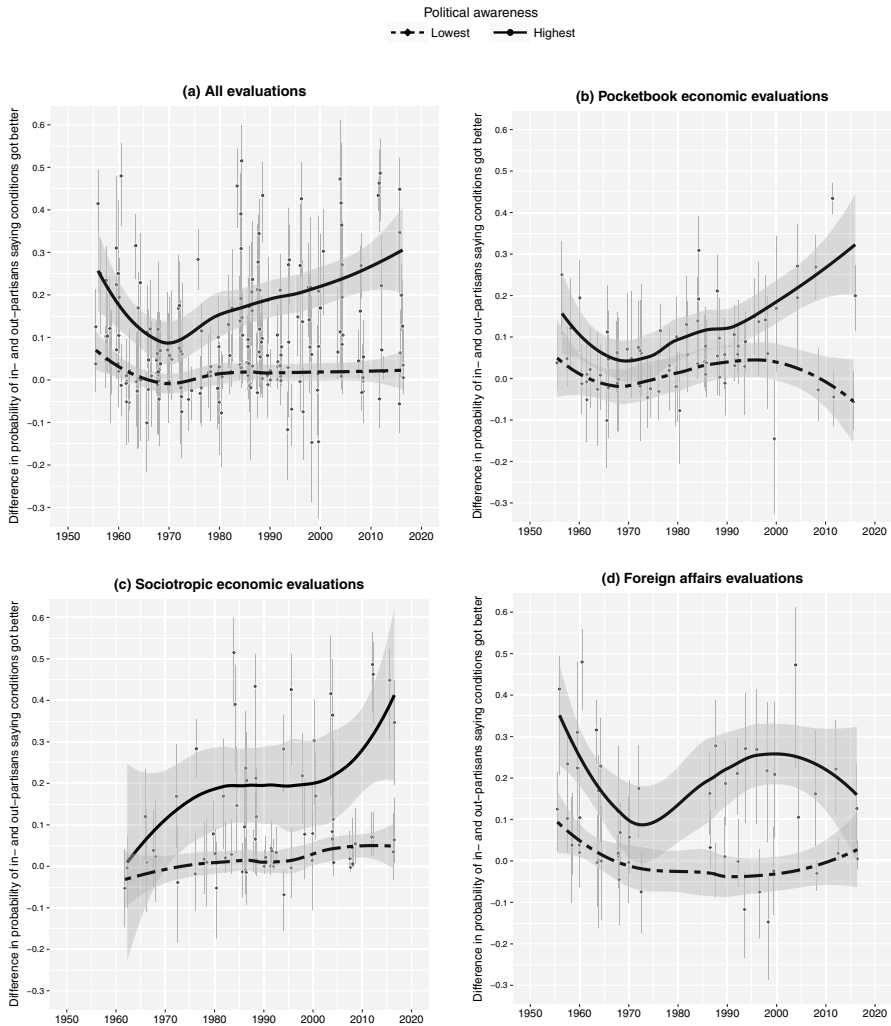


Fig. 2 Partisan perceptual differences by political awareness, 1956–2016. *Note:* First differences in the probability of saying conditions had “gotten better” between in- and out-partisans with 95% confidence intervals, simulated from ordered logistic regression models shown in online appendix. Dashed lines indicate those scoring at the lowest level of political awareness; solid lines those at the highest level. Other independent variables are held at their average values. Superimposed loess lines show local weighted average of the first differences, with 95% confidence intervals. Values on horizontal axis have been jittered slightly to distinguish estimates

between in- and out-partisans’ probability of saying foreign affairs had gotten worse increased from an average of -0.24 [$-0.14, -0.34$] in 1956 to -0.45 [$-0.32, -0.58$] in 2016 (the equivalent first differences among all evaluations combined were -0.18 [$-0.11, 0.25$] and -0.35 [$-0.28, -0.42$], respectively). In other words, partisan perceptual differences in foreign affairs also increased

over this time period, but this pattern appears most clearly when looking at negative rather than positive assessments.

These analyses ignore differences between partisans with differing levels of political awareness, however. Figure 2 replicates the analysis in Fig. 1, this time specifying models with an interaction between awareness and partisanship. First differences are simulated for those at the lowest level of political awareness (the dashed line) and at the highest level (the solid line).¹³

The results in Fig. 2 suggest that partisan perceptual differences have been consistently minimal among the least politically aware. For these respondents, most of the first differences are not significant: across all years, in-partisans had a significantly greater probability of a favorable response in only 15% of the 103 models. It is among the *most* aware that perceptual differences are the greatest. Among the highly aware, in-partisans had significantly more positive evaluations in 77% of the models.¹⁴ Partisan differences in retrospective evaluations are largely the province of the most, not least, politically aware.

Concomitantly, the change in partisan perceptual differences over time is the result of changes among highly aware voters. Among the least politically aware, in- and out-partisans in the 1950s held only marginally different perceptions: the average difference for 1956 is estimated to be 0.07 [0.02, 0.11]. Sixty years later, the least aware partisans still perceive the world in similar ways: the average difference is 0.02 [− 0.02, 0.07]. For the most politically aware, in contrast, perceptual differences have changed significantly over time. Partisan differences for this group were sizable in the 1950s—on average, 0.26 [0.17, 0.35]—but dipped to 0.09 [0.04, 0.14] by the early 1970s before tripling in size to 0.31 [0.21, 0.40] by 2016. While the least aware respondents have remained indistinguishable based on party identity, the most aware partisans have increasingly diverged in their retrospective assessments since the 1970s.

These conclusions are largely consistent across types of evaluations, too. Plots (b) through (d) in Fig. 2 all show minimal partisan perceptual differences among the least aware over time. In contrast, differences among the most aware have shown much more fluidity, driving the changes shown in Fig. 1. For example, plot (b) shows that among the most aware, partisan perceptual differences in pocketbook evaluations increased from an average of 0.17 [0.07, 0.27] in 1956 to an average of 0.33 [0.21, 0.44] in 2016. The least aware's evaluations, in contrast, showed no discernible partisan perceptual differences across the time series (ranging from an average of 0.05 [− 0.04, 0.13] in 1956 to − 0.06 [− 0.16, 0.04] in 2016).

Evaluations of foreign affairs among the most aware appear at first glance to contradict this trend. Partisan perceptual differences are estimated to have *decreased* in size for these voters from around 0.25 [0.18, 0.32] in the mid 1990s to 0.16 [0.01,

¹³ The average awareness score is .56 but these minimum and maximum values are not particularly unusual: 6% of all respondents score a 0, and 9% a 1. Section A4 of the online appendix provides more descriptive information about the measure.

¹⁴ This is consistent across types of evaluations: among the least aware, there were significant partisan perceptual differences on 14% of pocketbook evaluations, 19% of sociotropic evaluations, and 8% of foreign affairs evaluations. Among the most aware, those percentages are 56%, 89%, and 88%, respectively.

0.31] in 2016. As before, this apparent decline is largely a function of the choice of first differences to present. Figure A2 in the online appendix shows that differences in the probability of perceiving foreign affairs to have gotten worse increased substantially over the same time period for the most aware: from around -0.38 [-0.46 , -0.30] in 1995 to -0.61 [-0.78 , -0.44] in 2016. The presentation strategy chosen here, rather than a substantive shift in the structure of public attitudes, appears to be behind the decline in differences among the most aware shown in Fig. 2d.

The broader take home is that the size of partisan perceptual differences is not constant. Rather, these differences have fluctuated over time and increased in the past few decades, driven by changes in how the most politically aware voters perceive the world. In the next section, I assess how the political and economic context can help explain these trends.

Retrospective Evaluations in Context

I combine all of the retrospective evaluations and estimate multilevel ordered logit models. These are similar to the individual-level models used above, but allow several parameters to vary by year and (since each person could make multiple evaluations per survey) respondent. The year-level variables are then used to predict variation in the intercept and the effects of partisanship and political awareness. In addition to the independent variables discussed earlier, I include a linear time trend (measuring the number of years since the first survey) to control for any secular changes in partisan attitudes unrelated to these variables (Wooldridge 2009). Given the differences in types of evaluations suggested by Figs. 1 and 2, I also include a categorical variable indicating the type of evaluation being made (with sociotropic economic evaluations as the omitted category).

Table 3 presents three model specifications. Model 1 includes all retrospective evaluations. Model 2 includes economic evaluations only, to ensure that the inclusion of foreign affairs evaluations is not biasing the estimated effect of economic conditions. Finally, model 3 interacts partisanship with political awareness.

To appreciate how partisan perceptual differences vary with these contextual factors, I again simulate the first difference in the probability that in- and out-partisans had of saying that conditions improved, this time across a range of the year-level variables. For economic conditions, I estimate the size of partisan perceptual differences as GDP change ranges between -1.92 and 6.71 , the minimum and maximum in these data. For elite polarization, I estimate differences as polarization ranges between 0.50 and 0.75 .¹⁵ All individual-level independent variables are held constant at their average values as before; the type of evaluation is set to be a sociotropic economic evaluation and the simulations assume a presidential election year and

¹⁵ This is not the full range in the dataset; polarization reached a high of 0.84 in 2016. However, the highest levels of polarization have occurred solely during divided government. Simulating for values of both terms simultaneously results in highly imprecise estimates at higher levels of polarization. As such, I limit the simulations to values of polarization of between 0.50 and 0.75 , which is roughly equivalent to the increase in polarization between the 1950s and 2008.

Table 3 Multi-level ordered logistic regression models predicting retrospective evaluations

	(1) All evaluations	(2) Economic evaluations	(3) All evaluations
Intercept	1.22 (0.18)***	0.84 (0.21)***	1.01 (0.19)***
Elite polarization	17.93 (3.93)***	19.46 (4.47)***	15.68 (4.02)**
Δ GDP	0.20 (0.04)***	0.24 (0.05)***	0.15 (0.04)**
Δ GDP ²	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	− 0.00 (0.02)
Unified government	− 0.36 (0.20) [†]	− 0.26 (0.22)	− 0.08 (0.20)
Presidential election	− 0.20 (0.18)	− 0.23 (0.21)	− 0.29 (0.19)
Time trend	− 0.09 (0.02)***	− 0.09 (0.02)***	− 0.08 (0.02)***
Independent	− 0.36 (0.12)**	− 0.35 (0.13)*	− 0.07 (0.14)
Elite polarization	− 3.48 (2.69)	− 3.16 (2.84)	− 1.85 (3.00)
Δ GDP	− 0.02 (0.03)	− 0.03 (0.03)	− 0.02 (0.03)
Δ GDP ²	− 0.00 (0.01)	− 0.01 (0.01)	− 0.01 (0.01)
Unified government	0.15 (0.13)	0.19 (0.14)	0.06 (0.16)
Presidential election	− 0.16 (0.13)	− 0.08 (0.14)	− 0.08 (0.15)
Time trend	0.01 (0.01)	− 0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Out-partisan	− 0.39 (0.16)*	− 0.33 (0.16)*	0.03 (0.17)
Elite polarization	− 6.41 (3.52) [†]	− 4.69 (3.58)	− 1.36 (3.66)
Δ GDP	− 0.04 (0.04)	− 0.04 (0.04)	− 0.03 (0.04)
Δ GDP ²	− 0.02 (0.01)	− 0.02 (0.01)	− 0.01 (0.02)
Unified government	0.13 (0.18)	0.17 (0.18)	0.09 (0.19)
Presidential election	− 0.32 (0.16)*	− 0.25 (0.17)	− 0.15 (0.18)
Time trend	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Political awareness			0.44 (0.08)***
Elite polarization			3.32 (1.40)*
Δ GDP			0.10 (0.02)***
Δ GDP ²			0.01 (0.01)
Unified government			− 0.52 (0.08)***
Presidential election			0.11 (0.08)
Time trend			− 0.00 (0.01)
Independent × awareness			− 0.58 (0.15)***
Elite polarization			− 1.45 (2.83)
Δ GDP			0.05 (0.04)
Δ GDP ²			0.03 (0.01)*
Unified government			0.06 (0.17)
Presidential election			− 0.09 (0.16)
Time trend			− 0.00 (0.01)
Out-partisan × awareness			− 0.74 (0.11)***
Elite polarization			− 6.69 (1.95)***
Δ GDP			− 0.01 (0.03)
Δ GDP ²			− 0.00 (0.01)
Unified government			0.17 (0.12)

Table 3 (continued)

	(1) All evaluations	(2) Economic evaluations	(3) All evaluations
Presidential election			− 0.25 (0.11)*
Time trend			0.01 (0.01)
Age	− 0.08 (0.00)***	− 0.08 (0.00)***	− 0.08 (0.00)***
White	− 0.05 (0.02)**	− 0.03 (0.02) [†]	− 0.05 (0.02)***
Income	0.11 (0.01)***	0.16 (0.01)***	0.11 (0.01)***
Education	0.03 (0.00)***	0.05 (0.00)***	0.03 (0.00)***
Female	− 0.18 (0.01)***	− 0.19 (0.01)***	− 0.18 (0.01)***
Foreign affairs evaluation	− 0.30 (0.01)***		− 0.30 (0.01)***
Pocketbook evaluation	0.31 (0.01)***	0.35 (0.01)***	0.31 (0.01)***
Threshold 1	1.55 (0.01)	1.55 (0.01)	1.55 (0.01)
N evaluations	175, 469	133,537	175, 447
N respondents	47,452	46,904	47,442
N election years	27	27	27

Elite polarization, change in GDP, and the time trend are all centered around their (election year-level) average value

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [†] $p < 0.1$

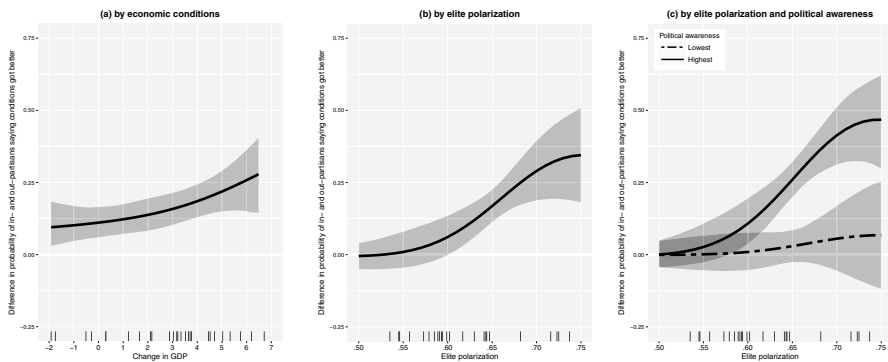


Fig. 3 Partisan perceptual differences by economic conditions and elite polarization. First differences in the probability of saying conditions had “gotten better” between in- and out-partisans with 95% confidence intervals. First differences in plots (a) and (b) simulated from model 1 in Table 3; first differences in plot (c) simulated from model 3. Other independent variables are held at their average values. Rug plots along the horizontal axes show the distribution of survey years across these variables

divided government. The first differences are presented in Fig. 3. Rug plots along the horizontal axis indicate the distribution of survey years for reference.

The evidence in plot (a) suggests that economic conditions have little influence on the size of partisan perceptual differences. Contrary to the hypothesis that perceptual differences decrease in size the more the economy deviates from normal (since motivated reasoning is harder in the face of a clearly strong/weak economy), the average size of partisan perceptual differences does not vary significantly with shifts in GDP. When GDP growth was at its weakest in this time period, the difference between partisans' probability of perceiving things to have gotten better is estimated to be 0.10 [0.03, 0.19] (these estimates are simulated from model 1). When economic growth was at its post-war average, the difference is an indistinguishable 0.16 [0.10, 0.21]. When growth was at its strongest, there is some evidence that the size of perceptual differences increased (0.28 [0.15, 0.41]), although the overlapping confidence intervals preclude any strong conclusions. Further, even if statistically significant, this would be counter to the expectation from previous work that partisan differences would *decrease* in times of dramatic economic change (Parker-Stephen 2013; Chzhen et al. 2014). In short, there is no evidence here for the thesis that partisan perceptual differences are diminished under conditions of extreme economic growth or decline.

In contrast, plot (b) suggests that the greater the polarization between elites, the greater the differences in partisans' perceptions of the world. Holding all else constant, at low levels of elite polarization we observe few differences between partisans. When polarization is set to 0.50, the first difference between in- and out-partisans is -0.01 [$-0.05, 0.04$]. At higher levels, when polarization is set to 0.75, that difference increases to 0.34 [0.18, 0.51]. Over and above any secular time trends, the estimates suggest that with greater elite polarization comes greater differences in how partisans view the world.

The results from model 3—with simulated first differences shown in Fig. 3c—indicate that elite polarization does not influence all respondents in the same way. Among the least politically aware, elite polarization has no discernible effect on partisans' perceptions. The first difference for the least aware does not change significantly across the range of polarization, ranging from 0.00 [$-0.04, 0.05$] to 0.07 [$-0.12, 0.25$]. For the most politically aware—those most likely to be paying attention to politics and most likely to receive messages from elites—polarization has a striking impact on the size of perceptual differences. For these voters, the first difference between in- and out-partisans increases from 0.00 [$-0.04, 0.05$] to 0.47 [0.30, 0.62] across the range of polarization.¹⁶

In contrast, the models do not offer much support for the theorized effects of unified government. The coefficients in models 1 and 2 are either statistically insignificant or signed in the opposite direction to expectations. Since in-partisans are the reference group, the estimated effect of -0.36 (SE = 0.20) of unified government

¹⁶ First differences simulated from model 3 that assess how changes in economic context influence the least and most aware respondents separately can be found in Section A6 of the online appendix. They do not suggest that the conclusions about the economy's lack of impact change when breaking the results down by awareness.

on the intercept of model 1 would imply that in-partisans are *less*, not more, likely to offer positive evaluations when their party controls all branches of government. The models also offer some insight into secular change in partisan perceptual differences over time. The estimated effect of time on in-partisans in models 1 and 2 is both negative and significant (-0.09 , $SE = 0.02$ in both), but the effect on the out-partisan coefficient is not significant in either (0.02 , $SE = 0.02$ in model 1; 0.00 , $SE = 0.02$ in model 2). Taken at face value, this implies that partisan differences would have been expected to *decrease* over time had other variables remained constant. This again underscores the importance of these contextual factors in explaining the changes in partisan perceptual differences over recent history.

The multilevel models provide several clear conclusions. While there is no evidence that extreme economic conditions limit the size of partisan perceptual differences, elite polarization is closely linked to how partisans view the world. The greater the degree of elite polarization, the greater the differences between in- and out-partisans' perceptions of retrospective conditions. This relationship, however, is again largely confined to the portion of the electorate most attuned to politics. Increasing elite polarization appears to have had no effect on the least politically aware, who are least likely to receive elite cues in the first place. For the most aware, in contrast, the extent of partisan perceptual differences closely tracks the degree to which elite politicians disagree.

Conclusions

While theories of retrospective voting suggest that citizens straightforwardly evaluate the state of the world and reward or punish incumbents accordingly, decades of research shows that voters tend to view the economy and foreign affairs through a partisan screen. Those who identify with the party of the president are more likely to think conditions are improving; those who identify with the opposition to think things are getting worse (Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2002; Wlezien et al. 1997; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Conover et al. 1987; Schaffner and Roche 2017). The results presented here illuminate how such partisan perceptual differences have changed over six decades of retrospective evaluations captured by the ANES. Three main findings emerge, with consequences for the broader literature in each case.

First, the extent of partisan perceptual differences has changed substantially over the post-war period. Partisan disagreement about the state of the world has roughly doubled since the early 1970s. This is true for sociotropic judgments, as well as for pocketbook assessments—a domain sometimes assumed to be less susceptible to partisan motivated reasoning. The size of partisan perceptual differences is thus not a given, and has fluctuated over recent history in ways not well captured by previous research.

Second, the size of these perceptual differences increases with political awareness. Among the least politically aware, there are few differences between in- and out-partisans' assessments—something as true in 2016 as in 1956. The most

politically aware are more likely to perceive conditions in a way that is favorable to their party. Rather than more awareness leading partisans to converge on the true state of the world, greater awareness is associated with greater perceptual differences. In this regard, the results align with previous work suggesting that partisanship's effects are strongest for the most, not least, engaged (e.g., Zaller 2004; Achen and Bartels 2016; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2014).

Third, the size of partisan perceptual differences tracks the increases in elite polarization over this time period. This is particularly true for the most politically aware, who are most likely to receive messages from partisan elites in the first place. In this, the results support the arguments that elites are the “culprits” to blame for partisan divides in the electorate (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Weinschenk 2012) and that escalating polarization has strengthened the effect of partisanship on mass opinion (Druckman et al. 2013; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010).

In contrast, there is no evidence here that extreme economic conditions limit partisan perceptual differences. That finding would seem to contradict recent work that uses highly similar data to show that economic evaluations track changes in objective conditions (Lewis-Beck et al. 2013). This apparent contradiction is largely due to different research questions, though: the interest here is in how the economy affects the extent of differences between partisans, rather than how it affects evaluations on average. It is certainly plausible that an exceptionally weak (strong) economy could make everyone's evaluations move in a negative (positive) direction (in line with Lewis-Beck et al.'s conclusion) while doing little to affect the absolute difference between partisans' evaluations (which is the conclusion here). Still, this null effect contrasts with previous work (Parker-Stephen 2013) and suggests the need for more research on whether objective conditions put boundaries on motivated reasoning.

As with all research designs, there are important qualifications to be made to these conclusions. A significant one is that, although the results have been interpreted as the effect of partisanship on retrospective evaluations, it is possible that the relationship is reversed. Rather than voters changing their retrospective evaluations to align with their party identity, they could be changing their party to align with their retrospective evaluations, as in Fiorina (1981). The research design used here does not allow us to evaluate these competing possibilities. However, panel studies that examine changes in individual-level partisanship do *not* suggest that party identity has become any more unstable over the time period examined here (Green et al. 2002, Chap. 3; Clarke and McCutcheon 2009, pp. 706–710). This would suggest that voters are increasingly likely to shift their retrospective evaluations to align with their partisanship rather than the other way round. Nonetheless, these data are not well suited to assess this possibility and so I leave this question open for future research.

In that vein, the data used here come with some significant constraints on our ability to assess the relationships between partisanship, political awareness, and retrospective evaluations. Partisan perceptual differences may be due to exposure to different sources of information, biased processing and recall of that information, or partisan cheerleading in survey responses (e.g., Gerber and Huber 2010). Pinning down the precise mechanism at play is not feasible with these data; more research

designed to distinguish between these possibilities is clearly needed to understand how partisans arrive at the perceptions captured in these survey items. We should likewise be cautious in interpreting the over-time changes shown here: the surveys used are not panel studies, and the same voters are not being tracked over the decades. Although the use of cross-sectional studies is similar to previous work (e.g., Weinschenk 2012; Enns and McAvoy 2012), it poses significant inferential challenges (see Gerber and Huber (2010) and Lenz (2012) for further discussion). Similarly, although the data include 47,00 respondents, the multilevel analysis rests on 27 surveys with inevitably limited variance in the year-level variables. This significantly limits the precision with which any contextual effects can be estimated.

Overall though, the results here show that the size of partisan perceptual differences in retrospective evaluations is not constant and is instead contingent on attributes of the voter and the political context. Somewhat ironically, given the frequent assumption that low-information voters are a problem for democracy, greater political awareness is associated with greater partisan differences in perceptions. Highly aware voters are more likely to rely on partisanship to guide their assessments of the world—more than their less engaged counterparts, and more than they did in the recent past. Increasing political attentiveness would thus appear to exacerbate, not mitigate, partisan perceptual differences.

Further, the extent of partisan differences depends on the political context of elite cues. In times of muted elite conflict even the most engaged partisans' perceptions differ only to a limited extent. In the current time of heightened elite polarization, the most aware have strongly diverged in their retrospective evaluations. Highly aware voters are most likely to receive, understand, and internalize cues from their party's politicians (Zaller 1992). As polarization increases, so does divergence in the cues sent—and the importance of a partisan label to voters' decision-making (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Druckman et al. 2013).

While this research shows that the extent of partisan disagreement is not constant, it also suggests that perceptual differences in the electorate are likely to continue to track the increasing polarization among elites. Absent more agreement among less polarized elites—which seems unlikely—stark partisan differences over the perceived state of the world, particularly amongst the most aware segment of the electorate, are likely to continue.

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